THE CABINET SECRET.

BY

LEIGH SPENCER.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON:
HURST AND BLACKETT, PUBLISHERS,
SUCCESSORS TO HENRY COLBURN,
13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.
1867.

LONDON :
PRINTED BY MACDONALD AND TUGWELL, BLENHEIM HOUSE,
BLENHEIM STREET, OXFORD STREET.

CHAPTER I.

"YES, Mr. Marsden, you say very true; I didn't wish to come away, indeed I did not. I will go back at once, only Mabel does not wish it—we must speak to Mabel."

Such was the answer given by the poor old man at No. 5, Newman's Buildings, to Frank Marsden, and for perhaps the hundredth time, as he ventured once again some allusion to the quitting of the Manor, some question as to the necessity of the step, or, in short, tried to glean some knowledge, however vague, from the fitful light of the poor sufferer's reason.

He looked up now in despair. The task seemed indeed a hopeless one, and he could but marvel again at the culpable negligence —such it seemed to the lawyer-mind of the young man—which had suffered the poor old

man to continue the conduct of his affairs till they had reached the point where interference would probably come too late. Again he tried to gently rouse the torpid faculties of the being he regarded as in some sort Mr. Lockstone's victim; for Frank Marsden did not come altogether unprepared, it may be remembered, to the task which had so singularly fallen to his share. The papers investigated, nearly a year ago now, had shown him enough to make him expect more professional dishonesty; if, indeed, such a term be admissible to indicate that system of fraud practised by some of the "Devil's own corps," which, while it keeps within perfectly safe bounds as regards itself, giving no handle to any honest man whereby to lead it into any public court for investigation and conviction, is yet ruinous to those on whom it is practised, and revolting in a fourfold degree to the honourable members of that same profession which such practice serves to render abhorrent to many an unhappy wight who might otherwise be too thankful for its services on his own behalf.

"Did not you keep any of your papers in your own custody, sir?" the young man asked, almost as soothingly as Mabel herself might have done. "Did you not bring any with you here?"

"Papers?" old Mr. Lee answered, contracting his brow with a puzzled air. "Papers? Why do you want papers?" he repeated, and then suddenly rousing, with a changed expression, and almost cunning look at the open, intelligent face by his side, he added, in a different tone, "He always asked for papers, you know, but he didn't get it—no, he didn't. I am sure of that, you know; and you are not going to get it either, young man. Did he send you here? Mabel!—Mabel!" and again the withered face changed to a look of fear, and the voice, which for an instant had had something of the old tone in it, sank into a weak, wavering, terrified call.

"No, dear sir, no, I am your friend, you know, and dislike *him* as much as you do," added Frank, hastily, and with a hardly perceptible pause after the pronoun.

Mr. Lee looked at him again, and the

terror subsided in a measure from his face and manner, but still he seemed uneasy, and fidgeted about restlessly in his chair. He was sitting on one side of the window, whence he could watch some workmen who had of late been busy in the desolate garden of No. 4, removing the rubbish and furbishing up the house, and whose proceedings were a source of great interest to the old man. So much so that Mabel dreaded the day when the work should be completed, and the row once more left to its usual quiet and solitude. Frank sat next him, his chair drawn a little forward, and so partly hiding the rest of the room from his view. And this it was which was now distressing him, as the young man speedily found, after watching his disturbed looks and feeble movements for a few seconds; so he got up, pushed back his chair, and stood a little behind that which Mr. Lee occupied.

No sooner had he moved than the old man bent eagerly forward and looked searchingly over the little square chamber, whose every nook and cranny might be very rapidly scanned. Apparently he was quickly reassured,

for he sank back again after a minute with a satisfied ejaculation, and as young Marsden bent to catch it he heard him mutter,

"Yes—yes, it's all safe—safe there! Mabel won't let it be moved. No one must have it, you know."

Frank wisely let the mysterious words pass at the time, making no observation of any sort, and he was presently rewarded by Mr. Lee's resuming the conversation by repeating once more,

"Yes, Mr. Marsden, we'll go back, only ask Mabel—Mabel says she does not want me to go back, you know."

At the same moment the door opened to admit Mabel herself. She was retreating again, when her father querulously called her back, and Marsden replied to her mute look of apology to himself,

"Indeed, Miss Lee, I think you may be of some little assistance in this matter if you would not mind being present at our interviews, though I am very sorry to have to bore you with business," he added, politely, for he had seen very little of Mabel, though he heard

of her constantly, as the poor old man's every second sentence was sure to refer in some way to his daughter; and it was this which now induced the young lawyer to try and enlist her services during their interviews, though it was most unwillingly he took such a step, for the memory of Hester Lockstone's character, as fully displayed to him latterly, was yet too present for him to believe that any girl could be other than a hindrance in such matters, while the very presence of one young and fair was still distasteful to him. He was always involuntarily wondering if she had still less heart than Hester, and how infinitessimal a portion of sense, uprightness, and sincerity fell as a rule to such a woman's share.

In short, Mr. Frank, though the *wound* was healed, had not yet cast off that good thick plaster of cynical distrust of womankind in general, together with a certain hardness and indifference to all soft feelings, which had been its last dressing.

He felt involuntarily a little ashamed of himself as Mabel looked frankly and pleasantly into his face as she simply answered,

"Indeed, all this is far too interesting to me for me to be other than very glad if I can be of the slightest use. Pray command me in any way, Mr. Marsden, without thinking of apologising," and she turned to her father, who had been impatient of even the short delay caused by this exchange of sentences.

"Mabel, why won't you take me back? I want to get back again, and Mr. Marsden says so too—only I told him we must ask you."

"Yes, dear papa, by-and-by," she answered, soothingly and lovingly, "but not just yet; you know, Dr. Armsdaile and Mr. Marsden both think we must stay a little longer here," and she bent over and caressed him as she might a roused infant. Even Frank could not see anything to cavil at in word or action, though he was watching in no friendly spirit; nay, he actually caught himself admiring the delicate beauty of her profile and the grace of her figure, as her attitude showed both off to advantage.

"But I want to go now, Mabel," persisted the old man. "I don't like this place. You know I don't, and I want to go back."

"You will stay here a little while for *me*, won't you, papa?" and she put her hand on his knee as she half-knelt before him, and looked up into his face. "Mr. Marsden thinks it is right, too."

"He said I should go back," returned her father, doubtingly.

"Yes, sir, and I hope you will, only not directly, as Miss Lee says," Frank said, as he thus found himself appealed to.

The old man looked up, and apparently something in tone or look recalled that old sore about the papers, for suddenly pulling Mabel close down to him, he whispered confidentially, "He is not to have it, Mabel—no—no one must—we'll keep it safe, darling, won't we, quite safe?" and again he looked back into the room; and this time Frank, who was listening and observing very intently, saw that his eyes rested anxiously on the curious old cabinet.

"Yes, papa, quite safe," Mabel answered, almost mechanically, she was so accustomed to these oft-recurring injunctions, that they made but small impression on her. Not so,

however, Frank. He fell forthwith into a brown study, and was no longer conscious of the flow of talk, half complaint, half appeal from the one, all soothing and gentle from the other, which continued between the father and daughter; and when he next roused himself, it was to find the old man's attention wholly absorbed again in the workmen, to whom Mabel had dexterously diverted it, on seeing that Marsden was apparently no longer in need of it.

Before very long, however, the workmen were packing up their tools, and Deborah came in to lay the cloth for tea. The old man immediately got up, and leaning on Mabel's arm, walked out of the room, on his way upstairs to dress. "Dressing for dinner" was second nature to him, and one of the habits still punctiliously kept up, though it was tea in lieu of dinner. And very great was the relief and blessing this often was to Mabel, who thus obtained some half an hour or twenty minutes' freedom from the wearing task of watching and soothing—for very wearing it was to the fresh young nature, though

she would scarcely herself have allowed it to be so, it was also such a labour of love.

Mabel returned, after seeing him safely to the foot of the stairs, as Mrs. Lee was, she knew, on the watch at the top, and Frank seized the moment that Deborah also disappeared, to exclaim eagerly,

"Miss Lee, are there any papers of importance in that old cabinet your father seems to prize so highly?"

Mabel looked surprised, and paused a moment before answering.

"No—I think not—indeed, I am sure there cannot be. Mamma and I have long kept our silk and worsted, and such like women's treasures, there."

"But he thinks a great deal of it, doesn't he?"

"Oh! yes; he took a sudden fancy for it a long long time ago at the Manor, and was never happy if he was long without seeing it; so much the reverse, indeed, that we made a point of buying it back and bringing it here," she added with a sigh.

The cost of that comparatively useless piece

of furniture was no trifling matter under their present circumstances, and Mabel was daily learning to realize the value of money more and more.

Some ungracious thought that she grudged the money employed on the purchase flashed through Frank's mind as she spoke, and he asked himself in a bitter spirit of contempt, "Are all girls such mammon-worshippers, then?" before he answered aloud, in so hard and icy a tone that it somewhat astonished his listener,

"Mr. Lee was speaking of papers, or, rather, I spoke of papers to him, when he first showed to me his anxiety respecting that cabinet's safety."

"Oh! he often talks in that way," Mabel answered, half-smiling; "it is his favourite piece of furniture—we brought several things besides, on purpose because we thought he would care for them, but it is only this one he ever speaks about, or seems to notice, and whenever anything arises about *home*"—poor Mabel unconsciously gave so pathetic an emphasis to that word, that it contrived to pierce

through a corner of Frank's mistrustful doubts as to her possession of a heart—"he begins to be uneasy about it directly. It seems just as if he thought that old cabinet and the Manor were the same."

"Does he ever go to it, or do you remember seeing him put papers into it?"

Mabel thought a little, and then answered,

"No; at least, I never saw him open any of the drawers. He sometimes puts his hand about it, as if to assure himself it is there; and once or twice he has been greatly disturbed because Deborah had accidentally moved it an inch or two."

Young Marsden gave a very professional grunt by way of response, and going up to the cabinet, walked round and round it very slowly, examining every part of it accurately the while.

"Do you suppose there is a secret drawer anywhere about it?" he asked presently.

"I really don't know in the least. I never thought there could be. Shall we open some of the others and see?"

So they set to work, Mabel opening drawer

after drawer, and Frank examining each with the closest attention, as well as the aperture whence it was taken. But the cabinet was not very small, the drawers many and curious, and before they had gone through one side, Mabel heard her father on the stairs, and hastily replaced a drawer young Marsden was about to investigate.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Marsden, but papa is coming, and indeed it would not do to let him see us routing his treasure in this way. You have no idea how painfully the mere fact of its being displaced just a little agitates him. Please can we not finish it another day?—when he is out with Dr. Armsdaile, perhaps."

Frank had nothing for it but to consent to this arrangement, though he by no means delighted in so sudden a check to researches he had a sort of presentiment would lead to some result. He concealed his impatience and disappointment as best he might, and prepared to take his leave when Mrs. Lee, who had accompanied her husband down, timidly asked if he would not stay and join their tea-table.

He hesitated a little, his recollections of family teas were not pleasant—worse of later years than formerly, too; and, besides, he had fought very shy of all young girls of late, as one of the most dangerous species of the race—hypocrites. Miss Lee was no exception, he believed—rather the reverse; nevertheless, he must be in her society a good deal, depend on her aid in some things, be thrown into very close contact with her, it was more than probable. So perhaps he had better see something of her first in her domestic life—the bosom of her family, as he half-muttered sneeringly to himself, just the minute before, his mind made up, he turned to Mrs. Lee, and assured her with the hypocrisy his own social politeness exacted, that he should be most happy to accept her kind hospitality and make one of their pleasant little party.

Did Frank ask himself who was the hypocrite there? Probably not..

The meal, however, was a very pleasant one, as it chanced. The poor old man was in one of his best and rarest moods, roused to

the greatest intelligence he now ever exhibited; forgetting all about the paper anxiety, excitedly pleased at having a guest, and showing a decided and growing partiality for the young man. Mrs. Lee was all gentle kindness and quietly agreeable; Mabel, her spirits raised with the hope, however faint, of better times, the certainty that something was being done, at any rate, was more, as her mother joyfully saw, like the old Mabel again, now fostering her father's feeble efforts at conversation, now venturing to start topics herself, and showing how charmingly she *would* have talked when mixing with that refined class to which she of right belonged; while every now and then she was positively gay, and her lively sallies made even her infirm father laugh, though he certainly knew not at what.

Frank Marsden appreciated it all in spite of himself—in spite of himself, too, he recognised the ring of the true metal, though of course he would not allow that he did so, sternly sneering to scorn a suggestion to that effect made by his own conscience, and indignantly strangling a feeling of being very

comfortably at home which once or twice dared to spring up in his heart.

Not that Mrs. Lee or Mabel would have themselves felt so very much like real friends towards Frank Marsden as to excite such a feeling in his breast at the end of a week's acquaintance, simply because he was the chosen emissary of the London lawyer's firm to whom they were bound to give every facility of unconstrained intercourse with the poor shaken imbecile who was still the head of the house, from motives of self-interest, as the best chance remaining whereby he could gain some clue towards the better disentanglement of that labyrinth Mr. Lockstone had seen fit to convert the business of Lee Manor into—if such a clue really existed, that is to say.

Not even Dr. Armsdaile's injunctions, almost prayers, could have made them do that, but for two additional very important facts. The young man himself was gentlemanly prepossessing, and they all liked him; while Dr. Armsdaile, they knew, did more than like, he loved him, though not altogether for himself, as he had seen very little of him since his boy-

hood, but for the sake of his parents, who had been that gentleman's dear and most highly valued old friends.

Frank Marsden came of a good old county family, though the connection had grown so distant through successive generations, that it had scarcely been recognised by the present head of the family in his father's time, and was altogether ignored as regarded the young man himself. Frank's great-grandfather had been the youngest son of an estate as large as Lee Manor itself; but he had a large family, large habits of life, and a small income, so that his son had been very glad to accept a little living from his rich uncle, as a means whereby to bring up his own children. At that living the elder Mr. Marsden had been born and chiefly educated. He, too, entered the church from no worldly motive, however, but conscientious choice. Frank was the only child of a very happy but short union, and no pains or expense had been spared on his early education; but both parents died while the lad was still in his teens, and as there was little or no provision

for him, his legal guardian was only too glad to get him, what was generally considered, a promising and lucrative berth in Mr. Lockstone's office at a less figure than the usual premium.

There Frank began his lawyer's life, and the years he spent there had not been disagreeable ones. He thoroughly mastered his profession, which was a good thing for him, and he fell in love with the lawyer's daughter, which, as he did not marry her, was perhaps a good thing too—a safeguard against many dangers and temptations to which young men are exposed.

It was not till after he had left Mr. Lockstone—left Merestown—and only returned at distant intervals to pay his *devoirs* to his *fiancée*, that the poor fellow began to suspect, and finally to know that neither the peculiar line of law practice which Mr. Lockstone occasionally indulged in, nor the character and sentiments of the lady, were such as he could join in or sympathise with as an honourable, high-minded gentleman. His visits began to be of very mixed pleasure to him, and at last be-

came altogether painful. With what ultimate result has already been shown.

Frank was now in a very different position himself, too; he was high up in that great, wonderfully acute firm of Sharp, Kewter, and Watchemklose—to be a partner shortly, the junior clerks whispered enviously to each other below their breath, and he had also become an independent gentleman; a bachelor great-uncle having died within the year and left all his fortune—not a very large one, but a most welcome stronghold in case of need to a penniless man—unexpectedly to Frank.

So he appeared at No. 5, Newman's Buildings a rising and prosperous man as to worldly circumstances, but a most unhappy and hardened one as to feelings. Poor Frank! He believed himself proof, too, against all love ever more—against all friendship also, or friendliness even, at least, till after long and severe trial had tested its worth and put it to the proof.

Dr. Armsdaile laughingly assured him, when he looked in the evening after his arrival in Merestown, that he was the most promising

specimen of the genus cynic he had seen for some time, "soon to merge into a chrysalis state, and come forth a splendid modern Diogenes," he asserted, with grave emphasis, belied by the twinkle in his eye.

"Well, well, go and throw the first beams of your lantern on my poor old friend in Newman's Buildings. He will show no flaw on the side of honesty, I will wager what you please. As to sound common-sense and easy credulity, the less we say perhaps the better."

"You have been at Merestown before, I think Dr. Armsdaile told us?" queried Mrs. Lee, gently, as the tea was drawing to an end.

"Yes, I lived in the town some years ago," Frank answered shortly, after a sharp glance at his hostess, to discover any covert meaning or allusion in her common-place remark.

"I daresay you find it very much changed. There are many alterations, I hear. I cannot judge myself, for I rarely came into the place formerly, and really knew nothing of it before."

Poor Mrs. Lee gave a gentle sigh as she

said this. How little in those days had she dreamed of being an inhabitant of the place —a dweller in Newman's Buildings.

"It is very much changed to me!" Frank answered, almost involuntarily, and then coloured with vexation, but very needlessly. His special antecedent connections with Merestown had been purposely omitted by the doctor in his sketch of young Marsden's history.

"Yes, after great big London, this must seem a very tiny crowd of houses," observed Mabel, reflectively; "but to me they seem never-ending sometimes when I am longing to get out into the real country at once."

"You do not care for the country-town delights of gossips and shop-gazing, then?" asked Frank, half-doubtingly.

"I don't know about the gossip—I never hear any," returned Mabel, smiling. "Perhaps I might learn to appreciate its delights if I did. As to the shops, unless I want something, they are very wearying, I think. Though perhaps if I had plenty of money to spend, even they might have their usual attrac-

tions for me, too—who knows, mamma?" and she turned with a sweet, laughing smile to her mother, on whose pale face a look of trouble had risen at the allusion to their poverty. Mabel saw it in a moment, and quickly added, "What a good thing it is I've no spare pounds to throw away. Perhaps if I had, Taylor's smart shop would be pleasanter to me than Fernvale dell, and I shouldn't like that at all."

Mrs. Lee laughed a little. She could not help it.

"As if the mere having money would change your tastes, my Mabel, in spite of your nature," she said.

"Well, mamma, wise people say it is the case. At any rate I am nearly sure I have read statements to that effect, and a good deal of philosophising upon it also. Have not you, Mr. Marsden?"

"Yes; but I incline to agree with Mrs. Lee, that if the will and the wish were strongly against the change, the hoards of Crœsus himself would make no difference."

"Ah! I don't know," returned Mabel,

shaking her head with mock gravity. "I believe I have been growing very fond of money myself lately."

"Heaven forbid!" ejaculated Frank, so earnestly that it startled himself as well as his listeners. "I mean," he went on, in some confusion, and greatly annoyed with himself that he had yielded even for a moment to the old nature and impulses he fancied so entirely subdued and under control, "that to begin to love money is a mischief. The possession of it may be perfectly innoxious—beneficial even—but the love of it is quite another matter. So you see it seemed a terrible idea to me even in joke, Miss Lee," and he smiled.

Mabel returned the smile, but was silent; her thoughts were very busy. She had noted the varying expression of the young man's features during his speech, and the notion occurred to her that he had either seen, or even experienced some bad effects of that love of money he evidently so dreaded. She looked at him with greater interest, and soon detected some slight traces of recent trial and suffering which would probably have been in-

visible to any but a woman's quick eye, aided by the rapid train of imagination that can sketch out the hidden story of a life, from some thought suggested by a passing word or look.

From that moment the young lawyer was invested with quite a new and distinct interest in her eyes, and was no longer *only* the agent employed to detect the possible flaws which even Mr. Lockstone's vigilance might have allowed to remain in his title to the possession of Lee Manor.

A pause had followed Frank's explanation. He still felt angry with his own vehemence. What did it matter to him if every girl in the world worshipped money—idolised it? How unutterably absurd he had been! What possible interest was it to him, in any way? Would that poor old man never have finished picking that wing of a chicken and allow him to get away? He had no business to have stopped at all. How very annoying it was that the peculiar features of this case almost compelled him to a domestic intimacy with this family, such as he had resolved to forswear

henceforth. Such were the cogitations broken in upon by Mrs. Lee,

"Which do you yourself prefer, Mr. Marsden, town or country?"

Quite innocent of the busy workings going on in the brains of both her daughter and their guest, she had begun to think the silence had lasted almost too long already for politeness with a comparative stranger.

Frank started and answered somewhat coldly,

"Really, I can scarcely tell you—my life has been too busy a one hitherto to allow of my making intimate acquaintance with purling brooks and waving trees, and all that sort of thing."

"For shame, Mr. Marsden, you don't really despise country beauties and pleasures, I feel certain—though you do speak so contemptuously," exclaimed Mabel, indignantly.

"Far from it," he answered, and this time without the satire only too audible in his voice before, but still with would-be indifference, "I only assert that I have had no leisure to appreciate them properly."

Mabel didn't believe this altogether, and she showed this so plainly by her look, that Frank felt compelled to add, a little hastily,

"I used to know something of them in my boyish days, certainly—but that was long ago."

Ah! thought Mabel, then they are somehow connected with his horror of loving money and his sorrow, whatever it is, and that makes him speak so bitterly, poor fellow!

By this time the old man had really finished his tea. His meals were the great events and pleasures of his life. The table was spread with the old china, glass, and silver to which he had been accustomed, and of which sufficient for their use had been carefully retained. Everything round him was what it had been in the old days; and once accustomed to the absence of his servants, he took delight in gazing on the well-appointed table, small as it was, while the simple occupation of cutting and eating his food served to employ him entirely; so the time filled up by dinner and tea at No. 5, Newman's Buildings, simple as were the viands prepared, was not inconsiderable.

"You have not finished, sir?" the poor invalid observed to Frank, as he himself replaced his napkin on the table; "you have made a sorry meal, I fear," he added, with old fashioned hospitality.

"I have done admirably, thank you, sir," answered the young man, rising to depart. "And now, if you will allow me, I will say good-bye. I shall see you again to-morrow."

"Yes, to-morrow," murmured Mr. Lee, in a puzzled fashion. "To-morrow—ah! yes, we are to go home to-morrow, eh! Mabel?" with a brighter look on his face as he turned towards his daughter.

The tears sprang to the poor girl's eyes. He had become so reconciled to the new life—so forgetful of the old home of late, and now it had all come back, worse than ever. Ah! surely this was a hard penalty to pay, even for the chance of recovering the Manor. And as Frank came up to say good-bye she looked imploringly into his face and murmured,

"Oh! if you could manage without talking to him!"

Frank shook his head decidedly, perhaps a

little roughly, but that troubled expression of the fair young face haunted him more than he cared to allow even to himself.

CHAPTER II.

BRISKLY Frank Marsden turned out of the little gate of No. 5, Newman's Buildings, and as he did so, he nearly ran against a closely-veiled female figure. He raised his hat, bowing his apologies, and wondering the while where she had sprung from, what she had been doing; he had not seen her as he came out, nor before, yet she was taller than the wall. Very possible all that though, for he was thinking—thinking deeply what a fool he had made of himself.

At this point his cogitations were interrupted by a hand being laid on his arm, and turning quickly round he confronted the same veiled figure about which he had been speculating. The moment he stopped she threw up her veil, and there stood Sarah Lockstone, more beautiful than ever, more satirical in

expression, more strangely incomprehensible than ever, too, he thought.

"So, Frank Marsden, revenge is sweet even to *you?*" she said, after they had gazed on each other in silence for a few moments. "But are you quite sure you can get it?" she added, in a mocking tone, half defiance, half inquiry.

The young man looked for an instant as he felt—astonished, almost bewildered by her address; then a light broke in on him, his cheek crimsoned, and his eye flashed angrily. Sarah noted the signs with intent and curious interest, reading greedily every varying expression on his face. Presently that of her own changed to genuine disappointment and almost pity, as she said in a tone of intense contempt,

"Bah! you had really no thought of it, then. You are a worse idiot than I originally took you for," and she abruptly turned away and quickly disappeared, walking at a rapid pace down a bye-street.

"What an incomprehensible being that is," thought Frank, as he watched her out of

sight, and then resumed his own way much more slowly. "Have I any such idea in my head, I wonder? I think not. I am sure not, if I know myself at all. Indeed, my first feelings were those of great annoyance at having this business assigned to me of all people, and I tried to get off it—it is most disagreeable altogether. Pshaw! as Mr. Kewter said, when I demurred on the score of my former connection with the man, I have no personal friendship any longer for him or his family, no respect for himself; but if I have any desire he should be shielded as much as possible in this business, if such a thing is possible, why, I am more likely to do it than anyone else; nevertheless, I had much rather never have come near the place again," and very moodily the troubled young lawyer went on his way.

Mr. Lockstone sat in his business-room in the town of Merestown. Very black was his brow, very forbidding the expression of his eyes, somewhat like those of a baited bear; while opposite to him, looking far more at ease, and with something of the look of a cat

when feeling perfectly secure of a persecuted mouse, was Tony Hicks, Rachel's old love, the shabby man whose sudden appearance had so moved Mr. Lockstone during that January drive with his daughter.

The man was better dressed now, but his face was even less agreeable to look on than before—perhaps from the greater contrast to it exhibited by his bran new black suit, and a flaming brooch fastening his stock. He sat also, and perfectly at his ease, in the very arm-chair which had once been appropriated to Mr. Lockstone's most honoured, most important clients. He watched that gentleman for some minutes with the feline expression above alluded to, and then observed,

"Well, Mr. Lockstone, of course it's exactly the same to me, only as you're an old friend, as I may say, I thought I'd give you first chance."

Mr. Lockstone uttered a fierce oath, and jumping from his chair, exclaimed,

"I tell you, Hicks, I won't stand this any longer. You imagine you have power to bully me into granting any exorbitant de-

mands you may think fit to make, but you've not, and I'll prove it to you."

"No, Mr. Lockstone, no. You put it in a very strange way, sir. Not exactly as you did when I took that charming little trip over the water, now—the words you used then wouldn't have sounded so ugly, even in full court; but blessed if I don't think these might!"

"You d—d scoundrel, what do you know of a full court, I should be glad to know?" and Mr. Lockstone came up close to the chair on which Tony sat, his face pale, and his voice trembling with passion. "But you shall know—know how it feels to face it from the criminal bar, and that before you are many days older," he added, concentrating his voice into a hissing whisper.

The man laughed contemptuously.

"You're quite a changed man, Mr. Lockstone, from what you were—if that's what comes of standing in other men's shoes, I'd rather wear my own; why, no one used to know when two and two didn't make four sharper than you. But you seem to forget all about that now."

"I don't forget a good deal—it would be better for you if I did, you impudent blackguard," was the angry retort; and for a little while Mr. Lockstone really looked like his old, hard, unscrupulous bold self.

But Tony never quailed for all that.

"Oh! I daresay both our memories would serve us equally well on a pinch, if it comes to that," he answered quietly; "but it won't come to that—you know better, Mr. Lockstone. If you hadn't, you would not have sent me over there again this time—not that I see any particular good you did by it."

"You tell me the old man is dead?" asked the lawyer, controlling himself by a great effort.

"Yes; and I believe you knew that before," returned the other, indifferently.

"And no one else is likely to remember the circumstances?"

"Oh! as to that, there would be plenty likely enough, if one made it worth their while to brush up their memories; but there's none likely to come forward about the business if ever they should hear of it and understand

the worth of the facts, which I never thought at all likely even as to the old parson, if you remember, though you did."

"Who is in his place?" muttered Mr. Lockstone, more as if wishing to fill up the time by saying something than as if really wishing for information.

The man looked at him sharply before he replied,

"A young fellow—very soft and easily managed; but I wouldn't try it on if I were you. I should be here just the same."

Mr. Lockstone groaned. Yes, he knew that well enough, and with probably increased power over him.

"What is it you want?" he presently asked, in a sullen tone, as he went back to his chair, and flung himself into it.

"I have told you—a home here in my native place, and enough to live comfortably in it. I am sure my wishes are both laudable and humble," he added, in a theatrical tone. "I only seek a place of rest in the town of my forefathers—a quiet spot where I may pass my days in peace and retirement—

nothing grand, nothing out of the way; and what proves it is the more than probability my wishes will be gratified," and he smiled significantly on the lawyer as he spoke.

"I'll be —— first if they shall!" cried the latter, fiercely.

"Probably afterwards in any case," mildly but very insolently suggested Tony, with a sneer. "But I think they will—yes, I think they will!"

A pause succeeded the latter words, which the man spoke very deliberately, pronouncing each word with separate and very significant emphasis.

Presently Mr. Lockstone asked,

"Why don't you wish to go abroad again?"

"Well, I don't see exactly that I'm called on to expose my private feelings to you," returned Tony, assuming an air of mock sentiment, which must have been irresistibly ludicrous to a less personally interested witness than the unfortunate lawyer; "but I'm not so young as I was, and I feel that the haunts of my youth have charms for me in my declining years, and there may be some other

reasons of a still more delicate nature."

"Curse your folly!" cried the other, sharply. "You know well enough it doesn't really matter a farthing to you whether you get drunk here or in Newfoundland."

"I beg your pardon, it matters very considerably. I'm not acquainted with the residence you name, though I've heard of it, but I don't think it's a climate I should like. Besides, I shall like to see how so excellent a gentleman as yourself manages so large a property as the Manor."

"Ah! you —— rascal, I knew that. It's just to watch me, to keep on annoying me, that you persist in wishing to stop here. But I tell you you shan't. If you like to go abroad I'll give you twice what you had before, but to stop here—not a farthing," and closing his speech with a still deeper imprecation, Mr. Lockstone sat up in his chair and tried to look firm and resolved.

Tony Hicks was no whit moved; he looked steadily at his old master for a short time, and then replied quietly,

"Very well. As I said before, for old

acquaintance sake I gave you first choice, but I fancy the little bit of knowledge I've got would be worth paying for, and I don't generally teach others for nothing. At any rate, I'll say good night now, and just step down and consult the lawyer from London that's come about Mr. Lee's business. Perhaps his opinion *may* agree with my own. At all events, I'll see," and he rose leisurely from his chair.

Stephen Lockstone, with a string of his favourite expletives by way of garnish to the injunction, bade him sit down again.

"You're a great fool, Tony—you always were," he went on, when the man had resumed his position.

"No doubt," and there was a peculiar twinkle in his eye, "or I should have gone to him first to-night instead of you, and shown him a neat little copy of a certain entry made some years ago over the water—eh?"

"You—you've not got a copy?" asked Stephen Lockstone, with eager, trembling lips.

The man looked at him with a curious ex-

pression for a minute, and then answered with contempt in his tone,

"No. But I will have one, and take it to him, too, in less than a fortnight, if I find it necessary. I might have got one as it was, but that consideration for you as a friend prevented it. What was the use of stirring up bygones and making people recollect what it was—just as well they should forget? However, if I made a mistake, it's easier repaired in this case than some are."

"You broke your agreement, you know; you were never to come back," Mr. Lockstone presently said, somewhat irrelevantly as it seemed.

"Rather I grew wiser as I grew older," returned the other, with a scoffing laugh, "and knew what a fool I had been to go away at all."

"It was the agreement," reiterated his old master.

"Pshaw! There should be no agreement, or rather no difference of opinion at all between two people whose interest is all one and the same. What's good for the one is for the

other, and you know that as well as I do."

Mr. Lockstone did not by any means recognise this argument, or, rather, he considered that what might be very good for the idle vagabond, Anthony Hicks, would certainly be very bad for him; but he did not think it worth while to say as much. On the contrary, he remained quite silent, his face leaning on his hands, till a distant sound in the house made him start up well pleased. The time for returning to Lee Manor had nearly come—he should be well quit of his unwelcome visitor for a time at least. Unfortunate Mr. Lockstone! Tony Hicks's presence made the old house in the High Street almost as great a purgatory to him now, as he had found that glorious country mansion when once he had entered it as master.

But his hopes were false this time. His tormentor had heard the sounds also, and knew perfectly well what they portended; while he was equally determined the matter in dispute should be settled that very evening, one way or the other. He quietly rose from

his chair, and going close up to where the lawyer was now standing, near the door, said in a low but resolute tone,

"Look you, Mr. Lockstone, I'll have an answer this time before you leave this room —what sort of one is just as you please, but something decided I *will* have; and if I go to the young gentleman from London, it'll be your own fault, that's all."

"Who is he?—do you know?" asked the tormented man, more to gain a little time still than out of real curiosity. He knew a messenger from the London firm employed was at Merestown, but not his name, nor had he as yet had any correspondence with him.

"Marsden; and a famous clever man he is, I am told," returned Tony. "Why, what's the matter?—do you know him?" he asked, observing the extreme pallor and agitation on his old master's face.

"Yes—that is, I believe I do—but it doesn't matter—only I'd rather it hadn't been him," gasped the lawyer; and he thought of Frank's cleverness, and then of his high principles and sturdy sense of honesty with

dismay. "But I'm safe, quite safe," he thought, "so long as that is not found; and as for the other matters, he's seen all the papers before—saved him trouble," and an evil sneer came up upon his face when Tony again recalled his attention, and this time a little sharply.

"Now, Mr. Lockstone, time's going, shall I wait on Mr. Marsden?"

Horrible was the imprecation Stephen Lockstone uttered as the words reminded him of the man whose existence he had for the moment forgotten while thinking of his old pupil. Why—why hadn't the sea swallowed him long ago, as he had earnestly hoped it would have done when he had sent him off years ago, recommending his passage in one of the very worst vessels he knew of. Anthony Hicks stood perfectly indifferent to words and tone, for, as he had been in the habit of observing in by-gone days to Rachel,

"Oaths break no bones and spill no money, so he's welcome to as many as he likes of them for me; only I shall have my rights, and let him have his curses."

"Well, sir," he now observed, as the lawyer remained silent after the first ebullition of impotent wrath.

"Have it your own way, Tony," he said at last, mastering his feelings by a great effort; "at the same time you're a fool, as I told you, and you'll think so some day."

"And I can take that little house I spoke of?"

"Yes—if you must have a house here; that's not a bad idea of yours."

"Though I am such a fool, eh?" returned Tony, with a half-cunning, half-ironical smile. "When shall I see you again?"

"Not to-morrow," returned Mr. Lockstone, with a half-stifled groan; "on Monday let it be."

"Very well. Good evening to you, sir. I'm glad you thought better of my waiting on Mr. Marsden."

And Anthony Hicks took himself off by that door of the office which led straight into the street.

Stephen Lockstone followed, and slipped the bolts and drew the chain after him with

a vengeful impetuosity, as though he would also have fain shut out all recollection of the man's existence from his mind.

"That ever he should have escaped drowning, drinking as he does, and two voyages in two such vessels, and I did all I could to get thoroughly quit of him. To turn up again now, too, just as all was going so right. Oh! it is cruel, cruel—a bit of devil's work, indeed!"

And then, as his thoughts went busily on working at the memory of his schemes, and of what had thwarted and might again thwart them, another idea presented itself; and as he re-entered the office, he exclaimed aloud, in the bitterness of his vexed soul,

"But I shouldn't care for him—he might live or die, drown or hang, if I knew where that paper was. Let me once have that safe in my clutches, and I could defy and laugh at them all!"

"Then I am sure *I* wish you had it," said a cold, ringing voice he knew full well; and as he bounded from the floor in his surprise at hearing it there, his eyes were met by those

of his daughter, wearing the look he knew so well.

A smile passed over her face as she observed the movement he made.

"Really, papa, I am delighted to see that you are still capable of so much youthful activity in your movements. But may I ask what paper it may be whose possession would so transmogrify you? If it really is capable of producing the effects you name, I am sure no pains should be spared to procure it, simply in one's own defence. It is not agreeable to live constantly with the face of a condemned man before you."

"What—what is it you mean, Sarah?" gasped her father, with a choking voice and terrified air.

She eyed him closely, scrutinizingly, before she answered—

"Nothing more than I say. A laughing face, if generally very absurd, is at least better than one which looks only prepared for torments, as yours has of late."

"You speak like a fool, Sarah," said

Stephen Lockstone hastily, though he was greatly relieved by her answer.

"And you act like one, sir, which is rather worse of the two," returned Sarah, composedly. "But suppose, instead of complimenting my wisdom, my folly rather, you were to answer my question. What paper is it that you are so eager to possess?"

"You know nothing about it," returned Mr. Lockstone, evasively. "It—it is a business matter," he added, as she fixed that searching glance upon him he knew by experience he could not resist.

"I could guess as much as that before, sir. May I trouble you to tell me what I do *not* know?"

"I—I can't, Sarah," faltered out her father, desperately; "it—it would do you no good to know, but it is of great importance to me."

"And is probably connected with Lee Manor, I presume?"—and Sarah continued her pitiless gaze on her tortured, fidgeting father.

He did not answer, but his pallid cheek flushed for an instant, and his eyes wandered restlessly round the room, as though seeking some way of escape from his persecutor.

"That will do," said Sarah, after watching him quietly for a minute; "I will spare you an answer in words. But where do you suppose this very important document to be?"

"I wish to heaven I knew," returned he, so earnest in his sincerity, that his daughter was satisfied, and released him from his torture for the time with the observation,

"It is rather singular, I should think, that so precious a bit of paper was not more carefully seen after."

A few minutes after, and father and daughter were in their carriage returning to dinner at the Manor. Arrived there, both went up the broad stairs in silence. On the first landing Mr. Lockstone paused, and glanced hesitatingly at his daughter. She perceived the look in an instant, and stopped also, with a somewhat impatient "Well?"

The timidity and vacillation that had

grown on Mr. Lockstone of late were especially irritating to Sarah's bold, resolute nature, and far more intolerable than his worst fits of passion and violence.

"Mr. Marsden is down here to look into matters, employed by Mr. Lee."

"I know it—what then?" was the laconic rejoinder.

Her father looked at her in great surprise. How could she know Frank Marsden was down in Merestown? She interpreted his thoughts, and said contemptuously,

"I go about, sir, employing my eyes and ears for the purposes they were intended for, not occupying them with discovering improbable shadows and possible dangers, instead of acquainting myself with facts that are imminent."

"You think there is danger, then?" asked her father, eagerly.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, impatiently—"surely Hester's mantle has not fallen upon you! I never thought of there being any real danger. *You* know best as regards that," she added, pointedly. "That Frank

Marsden was here I knew four days ago; but what of that?"

"I knew these people had sent a man down, but I never thought of Frank Marsden. I was considering what it might be best to do."

"Do!—just exactly what you would if it were a perfect stranger. Frank Marsden is so to us now. I cannot see what difference it can possibly make. You, who have been of late so gifted in discovering what are popularly termed *mares' nests*, may have made some wondrous discovery respecting it. *I* am not so clever."

Mr. Lockstone muttered something—not exactly a benediction on his daughter, and passed on. He was almost worn out with the repeated tortures that day had brought to him, and could encounter no more, once satisfied that Sarah saw no special reason for alarm in the fact of young Marsden's presence on such an errand. It would have been pleasanter to have had his mind set at rest less tauntingly, but he was thankful to have it so at any cost.

Meantime another interview was going on at the old house in the High Street. Tony Hicks did not go far away when he left his master's old office, only to a public-house a few doors down on the opposite side of the way, where he could at once refresh his inward man after that struggle of words and wit, and ascertain when Mr. Lockstone should be fairly started for the Manor. No sooner had the carriage disappeared down the street than Tony finished his glass with one hasty gulp, threw down his reckoning, and hurried back to the house he had so shortly quitted; but this time he knocked at the private entrance. It was opened by Rachel, who first looked suspiciously out, holding the door half open, and then putting it wide, planted herself on the mat, and confronted the visitor with no very promising expression of face.

"Have you quite forgotten me, Rachel?" he asked, in the softest accents he could command.

"Does one often forget the dog that bites, or the wasp that stings him?" was her

answering question, in a cold, contemptuous tone.

"As to that, Rachel, it is I might say it, I think, with more truth than you," returned Tony, with meek reproach in his tone.

"Oh! of course there was never a man born yet who couldn't lay his own faults to somebody else's door, if you choose to believe them," said Rachel sarcastically.

"I don't know about faults, Rachel. I fancy it's no great virtue for a woman to go on making a man fancy she'll marry him, and then turn him off when the time to do it comes."

Rachel's eyes flashed almost as brightly and angrily as those of her young mistress, as she looked at the speaker while he said this; but all she said was, very quietly,

"You've brought back the same tongue you took away with you, Anthony Hicks, I find."

"And the same heart, too, Rachel, which is more than many a man could have said, I

expect," he replied, with an effort at tender reproach in his tone.

"Oh! plenty could say as much, and, what's more, there's plenty of women to believe them; but I'm not one, Tony Hicks, as I think you might have known."

"I know you're not one to turn your back on an old friend," he answered insinuatingly, unless you're a good deal more changed in your nature than you are in your face, Rachel."

Rachel returned the implied compliment by looking its payer full in the face for at least a minute, and then she laughed a long, shrill laugh, with no real merriment in its ring, however.

"Anthony Hicks, did you take me for a fool long ago, or do you think I'm grown one in my old age?" she demanded when her laugh was brought to a conclusion.

"What I want to take you for is a friend," Tony answered, in a more outspoken fashion than he had yet used, and this time he had calculated better. He was not so completely snubbed.

"Well, that's bold, I will say that for you," was Rachel's answer, but with not quite so freezing a tone.

"I'm come back for good, and all I hope, Rachel, is to live and die in the old place," he proceeded sentimentally, "and I should like to have some old friends, too."

"You'll find plenty, I make no doubt," Rachel answered drily, "if you can wear such clothes as those, and pay for them."

"Which I can, Rachel. Oh! you needn't think I'm come back a poor man," he added with a proud, hurt tone.

Rachel looked at him sharply.

"You didn't look very rich the first day you came here."

He started, but soon recovering himself, looked at her in turn, and said,

"So you knew me then, Rachel, in spite of my clothes? You've a good memory, anyhow."

"Didn't I tell you 'tisn't easy to forget the dog that bites you?" she replied irritatedly. "I believe I should have known you anywhere, rags or not."

"Rachel, you're hard on me, and that's the truth," he answered in a hurt tone. "I shouldn't have thought *you'd* bear malice, even if anyone had done you an ill turn, which I don't allow I ever did. Won't you let bygones be bygones, and be friends with me?" and he put out his hand to take hers.

Rachel hesitated for a little, and then put her own reluctantly into it.

"I've no objection to be neighbourly with you, Tony Hicks, but as to friends, I'll say nothing of that yet awhile."

"All right. But you don't say you *won't* be friends, Rachel, that's all I ask just at present; and you'll let me step in and see you a bit sometimes—I've a load to tell you."

"I daresay you've been gone away nigh on twenty years?"

"I know I have, and a lot of queer things I've seen and heard. Shall I come in now?"

"No, not to-night," Rachel answered somewhat sharply. "I'm too busy; next time you call, perhaps—I won't promise—and now good evening to you, Tony, for I've got some work I must do before supper," and Rachel,

scarcely pausing for a reply, shut the door hastily and retired into the house.

Tony went slowly away, and as he reached the end of the street he looked thoughtfully back, and muttered reflectively,

"I wonder what money she's saved?"

CHAPTER III.

THE crocuses and snowdrops Mabel had planted with such care along the little slip of garden at No. 5, Newman's Buildings had bloomed, and all but faded. The hyacinths had shown their pink and purple blossoms; the little sweetbrier planted under the window had sent its first early fragrant perfume into the little sitting-room, breathing of spring and sunshine, song and hope; and a bunch of roses, young Reuben Hernshaw had gathered last market-day morning to bring to Miss Lee, were blooming on the table, and filling the air with their sweetness.

In short, the year was a little older, and Frank Marsden had already been some weeks in Merestown, and had become very much at

home in that little square parlour, his efforts to the contrary notwithstanding.

As to the special business that brought him there, it had not progressed very much, nor did he see any prospect of its doing so. He had discovered very little, if anything, that he had not known before. If Mr. Lockstone had not acted quite as a high-principled man —as Frank himself would have done in the same circumstances—if he had taken advantages here, strained a point to his trusting employer's disadvantage there, still there was nothing to take hold of legally—no omission or commission for which he could be called to account in a court of justice—no chance whatever, according to Frank's present knowledge, of forcing him to resign the estate, or refund any of his spoils—nothing even to justify any public exposure of his conduct. No. So far as the young lawyer could discover, he had kept carefully within the safe and legitimate bounds dividing culpable dishonesty from plausible spoliation, such a distinction being only too often allowed in practice in such cases, however reprobated in theory.

That he had taken the utmost advantage—rather more—that his position allowed was only too evident; but, alas! nothing could be done. There was no existing remedy to apply to such a case, and poor Frank pondered, examined, compared, searched, fumed, and finally despaired, all in vain.

"If the entail had never been cut off," he exclaimed one day to Mabel, "that would have made every difference. What a thousand pities it was!"

"Yes, I believe so. But it puzzles me very much to know why that should so very much alter Mr. Lockstone's honesty or dishonesty."

Frank laughed.

"It does not alter *that* exactly. I'm afraid in any case that remains the same. But it would considerably alter the legality of many of his proceedings. I cannot help fancying," he went on, musingly, "that there is something behind—some secret we cannot fathom. Mrs. Lee thinks so, too, I fancy," he added, half interrogatively.

"Not exactly that, but she has an idea, I

believe, that my poor father knows something of importance, if he were but able to fix his attention on one thing sufficiently long to remember and disclose it."

"That is more than likely—I have often thought so myself. If it is so, depend on it it is, as I say, some secret we cannot discover without a clue."

Mabel sighed. It was almost worse to believe that there might be a way of recovering their old home, a way which a word might discover to them, could that word but be spoken, than to regard it as gone irrevocably, painful as such a certainty must be. She partly expressed this feeling in answer to some inquiry as to her thoughts from Frank, and he answered,

"Yes, anything is better than uncertainty. I think I would rather know of the existence of a great trial, and be able to face it manfully, than have a lesser one hanging threateningly over my head, in doubt if it would come or not. It is somewhat like a hidden and an open foe."

"Quite, except that one can hardly mistake

a trial for a joy, and one can believe a foe a friend. Do you not know that for years we trusted and depended on Mr. Lockstone, believing altogether in his uprightness?"

"Oh! yes, I know it very well," Frank answered, in rather an embarrassed voice.

He perfectly remembered seeing many proofs of the Lees' trust and dependence on their agent in the days when he was an inmate of the old house in the High Street. Not that it was this memory which troubled him now; no, it was the consciousness of Mabel's entire ignorance of his former connection with the Lockstone family. He had often begun to feel this of late as a sort of hypocrisy and deception on his part, and had as often resolved to tell the tale, but either opportunity or courage had always hitherto failed him. Now, however, he was determined it should come out, and with a desperate effort he began—

"Miss Lee, Dr. Armsdaile never told you part of my history. I was articled, as it is called, to Mr. Lockstone himself, and spent many years of my early youth in his house.

Will you believe that I too believed in him then?"

"Oh! yes; why shouldn't you?" Mabel answered, readily. "It is much easier to believe in people than the reverse. At least, I think so," and she turned her innocent, sweet face to Frank as she spoke, full of trust and confidence in him.

It emboldened him to the further, and, to him, worse confession of his engagement. An idea had been growing on him for some little time that this fact told considerably worse for him than for the Lockstones—at any rate, as regarded his sense and power of discernment; and he felt as though he were sailing under false colours, showing himself other than he really was, till those he associated with as intimately as he now did with the Lees should know all about his former connection with the Lockstones. Sooner or later they would be sure to hear of it, and he preferred it should come from himself. Somehow for the past week or two Master Frank had been somewhat inclined to make an exception in favour of Mrs. Lee, at any rate—possibly of Mabel—

from his sweeping condemnation of womankind in general, as heartless and money-worshipping.

"You know, I suppose, that there were some daughters?" the young man said, after a little pause, but in a rather hesitating, confused fashion.

"Yes. I did not know how many, but Deborah once told me people said they were remarkably beautiful. You can fancy poor old Deb's indignant comments upon the opinion, too," she added, smiling. "She would not allow any beauty in them if they were Hebes, you may be quite sure. Are they really beautiful?"

"Yes, I suppose they are. I mean," blundered on Frank, "that they would be thought so, though they have nothing of a Hebe about them. The youngest, whom I never admired in the least, has a little resemblance, to my notion, to a Juno, but to me she is repulsive rather than anything else. I used to have such a detestation of her conduct in her home; but, heaven knows, I may do her less than justice in one way, as I did the

other more in those days. The eldest daughter was more attractive to me. She was gentle, and—and foolish, I have an idea now—I did not think so then. I was *very* young, you know, Miss Lee, and boys have a good deal of romance, I assure you," and he paused again.

Mabel saw his confusion, and partly suspected its cause; though she was considerably surprised she helped him out.

"And I suppose you fancied yourself in love with her?" she said, a faint tinge colouring her cheeks as she spoke.

"Not only fancied, I am afraid—I am not quite sure about that, even now—I was engaged to her for years, and it was only last summer that she herself broke it off. You despise me, don't you?" he added, as he observed, with the quickness of great sensitiveness on the point, a change pass over Mabel's easily-read face.

"Oh! no—not—not for being engaged to her—she may be a very nice person in spite of her father, I suppose—but oh! Mr. Marsden, how could you come here so soon to act against people you had been so closely inti-

mate with?" and poor Mabel looked up, quite troubled at the idea.

Frank coloured deeply. The view of the subject, as Mabel put it, had never occurred to him. It was not likely it should, knowing the facts he did. Why, after looking over those papers about Lee Manor, which Mr. Lockstone had so shamelessly laid before him, had he not longed there and then to enter the lists against him, to bring him to book if it were possible? Was it not because of his love to Hester? and was not the thought that it was *her* father the only one that restrained his indignation and contempt from exhibiting themselves at once? Something of this, after a moment's hesitation, he endeavoured to convey to Mabel, adding,

"Even in all the humiliation of her rejection, Miss Lee, I remember there was a sort of feeling of escape—escape not from her, for, as I told you, I had been and remained very blind—but from alliance with a man who held such warped notions of right and wrong, to use a mild term, as I had seen proof enough her father did."

Mabel did not answer; and looking at her, Frank felt quite sure all he had said had failed to reconcile her to his having undertaken his present occupation. This both nettled and vexed him he hardly knew why, but he said with something of appeal in his voice, "You are not satisfied still, Miss Lee? You think *I*, at any rate, should have remained neuter?"

"Yes; I do. I cannot help feeling so," she added, half apologetically, for she saw that her words were not welcome ones.

"You do not think any feeling of revenge, so to speak, influenced me?" he asked, remembering Sarah Lockstone's attack, and her subsequent contempt when she found her impression a mistaken one. How very widely different were her opinions and style of reasoning from those of the pure-hearted girl beside him! Her answer showed this very plainly.

Oh! no! no!" she exclaimed eagerly, deprecatingly. "How could I think of anything so horrible? I should rather imagine that, still tender of his good name and honour, you undertook it with the hope of being able to lessen any evil resulting to Mr. Lockstone

from inquiries which must have great influence on his future prospects. Thinking of him as well as of us—more than any stranger would, I mean."

Frank smiled in spite of his vexation as he answered honestly,

"I am afraid no such benevolent thought occurred to me, Miss Lee; till my employer suggested it, revenge of either sort did not enter my head—either that of the man or of the Christian," he added in a lower tone.

"But it would, when the time came," rejoined Mabel eagerly; "if the opportunity had offered you would have been merciful, I am sure of it," and she looked anxiously into his face for the confirmation of that of which she felt so sure.

"As merciful as justice would allow. I hope, I believe I should have been," Frank answered gravely, "but not from any special feeling towards this man or his family. You give me too much credit if you think that. We men are made of hard stuff, I am afraid, Miss Lee. At any rate, I for one can hang no tender memories about my recollection of

a heartless woman and an unprincipled man."

He spoke the last words emphatically and rather harshly. Mabel made no answer for a few minutes, and then she asked timidly,

"Was it—do you mind my asking—the same Miss Lockstone who was married the other day? Deborah told me one was, I fancy."

"Yes—and I do not mind your asking at all," Frank added, smiling; "the Hester of my boyish imagination was a very different being from the Miss Lockstone who married Mr. Geldfinder, little more than six months after rejecting me—breaking the engagement of years."

"How could she do it?" murmured Mabel in a pained, shocked tone. "If she had not married, I should have believed she had resigned you from an honourable feeling on discovering some of her father's schemes; but I am afraid that could have nothing to do with it."

Frank laughed aloud. He could not help it. How could he, remembering so well some of Hester's words as they sat together in the wood on that eventful day? Hester acting on such principles! Their even suggesting

themselves to her! And he laughed again. A short time back it would have been a very bitter laugh; but Frank's cynicism and hardness were daily modifying and melting under the genial influences at work in that little square house, No. 5, Newman's Buildings, and there was really very little in his laugh but sheer amusement at Mabel's thus thinking of Mrs. Geldfinder—of her picturing that lady very much as he himself had done before he had undergone such sharp teaching to the contrary. That thought recurred to him after a little, and he said soberly,

"You are imaging my ideal Hester, not the veritable scion of the Lockstone house, in supposing such motives. You are still in the same dreamland of youth I once enjoyed. Ah! Miss Lee, may it never be your lot to awaken so painfully as I did!"

He spoke very earnestly, and the tears rose to the young girl's eyes.

"I am so sorry—so very sorry for you," she said gently.

"Are you sorry enough to forgive my being here?" asked Frank, looking down on her rather anxiously.

"As a foe to Mr. Lockstone—yes, I think so," she answered, a little doubtfully still; "but I would rather it had fallen to anybody else's lot."

"So would I, and I told my employers so at the time, but they overruled my objections, and made it a point of my coming. Indeed, they went so far as to say they considered Mr. Lockstone's conduct, so far as they could judge of it, put him beyond the pale of even professional etiquette, and that they looked on my having been with him, and knowing something of his affairs here, as making it doubly imperative on me to accept the task as a duty."

Mabel shook her head.

"I can't see it so. It seems like taking unfair advantage—like sending a deserter to reconnoitre the enemy's camp."

"Which is the last thing people would do, I imagine, as the very fact of his desertion would prodably make such a step unnecessary," Frank answered, smiling.

Mabel laughed.

"Yes, it was a very bad choice of a simile;

and, besides, you are no deserter in any sense."

Frank bowed.

"I am forgiven, then, and you won't think me very hard-hearted?"

"I won't promise that; but I don't think you quite so inexcusable as I did at first. I suppose men think differently on such things from what we should," she added meditatively. "I do not think anything could induce me to proceed against a family whose every-day life was intimately known to me as once one of the household."

"That is the hardest thing you have said yet, Miss Lee," said Frank, in a hurt tone. "And you must remember it is long ago since I was an inmate of their family. Years have passed since then. Of all this business which I am here to investigate I know nothing, except, indeed, the little I gathered from the papers given me to look at by Mr. Lockstone, when I spoke of your affairs, on the day I was at his house for the last time, which very papers are now in my possession, as the lawyer employed by your father. There is nothing

known to me through my former domestication with this man's family of which I could take advantage, even if I would; and it was this fact that finally determined my acceptance of the trust committed to me."

Mabel was sorry for the words, as she saw the effect they had taken, and frankly holding out her hand, she said,

"I did not mean to wound you, Mr. Marsden, indeed. You are a better judge in this matter than I, and when I spoke just now it was merely a thoughtless utterance of the feeling of the moment."

Frank took the little hand in his, and as he felt its gentle pressure, he wondered if he was indeed a better judge of right and wrong than she, in her fresh youth and trusting purity of nature—thinking, indeed, no evil, believing in all things right and good.

"I do not know that I had any right to trouble you with all this," he said; "but I did not like the idea of your not being aware of it all."

"Oh! it was anything but trouble to me to listen," Mabel answered, earnestly. "I

liked to know it, and I think it was so very nice of you to tell it," she added, timidly.

And so thought Mrs. Lee, when her daughter repeated the heads of the conversation to her.

"Poor young man!—it was honest and straightforward to tell you all about that," she observed; "it could not have been a pleasant history for him, Mabel, dear. What dreadful people these Lockstones seem in every way! I suppose Dr. Armsdaile knew all about this, although he never mentioned it when speaking of Mr. Marsden."

"Oh! yes, mamma, I am sure he did. Indeed, Mr. Marsden said as much; but of course such very private matters could not be told in that way."

"No; and there was no absolute need we should have been told at all—but I am glad he makes such friends of us. It gives me greater confidence than ever in him. He is a well-thinking as well as a very pleasant young man, and deserves a better fate than being Mr. Lockstone's son-in-law."

So thought Mabel; and though she did not

say much more about the matter, she continued to think a good deal upon it. Frank's energetic horror of money-loving young ladies was easily explained now, as were those signs of past trial and care which had first excited greater interest in her mind regarding him, and which she fancied were now lessening bit by bit every day. Sincerely she trusted it was so, and very willingly she lent her own aid to dispel them by every gentle means in her power. They were becoming very fast friends, Mabel and Frank, and his daily visits to Newman's Buildings were no small relief to the weary monotony of her secluded life. Indeed, they were boons, in a greater or less degree, to every member of the little household.

Deborah rejoiced in a guest, no matter of what sort, to the forsaken, isolated family, and would have joyfully undergone four times the little extra trouble and contrivance his occasional presence at meals entailed on her. He was "pleasant to look at, too," as she sometimes confided to Miss Mabel, "since he'd left that stern haughty look somewhere

behind him—the farther off the better, she should say; and he'd an open, joyous way with him now, it did one's heart good to see. He's one of the right sort, Miss Mabel, depend on it, whatever he is, or on whatever errand he is come," she would conclude, emphatically, after one of her pæans respecting him, and Mabel was nowise inclined to dispute the opinion.

Mr. Lee had learned to look for his appearance with scarcely less interest than for that of Dr. Armsdaile.

To Mabel it gave the companionship of comparative youth, while Mrs. Lee, liking him herself, rejoiced greatly at the pleasure his presence gave to the two precious objects of her tender solicitude.

Frank had arrived one morning, as he often did now, before Mr. Lee was down, and, after his first salutation to Mabel, he asked,

"Would it be safe, do you think, to have a regular turn-out of that old cabinet now? My fingers have been itching for the task this last fortnight, and it seems to me we may wait for a year before this drive comes off."

"Oh! no, not now. The poor man is re-

covering whom Dr. Armsdaile has been to see so constantly; he told me so last night, and that he hopes to take papa and mamma a nice long drive next Thursday, so please wait till then. You know how anything connected with that cabinet excites him, and if by any chance he found us routing in it I can't think what he would do."

"That's exactly why I am so impatient about it. I feel more and more certain there is something beyond mere delusion in his anxiety about the thing. What secret do you hold, I wonder?" he added, going up to it and pulling out one of the smaller drawers. "It must be that of our success, if we are to find it anywhere. Surely you and I could have all these things out and in long before your father is likely to be down."

"Perhaps; but you know you said last time we were looking at it that you must have every drawer out at once, you thought, to tell certainly what might be in the middle, and you don't know how long it would take to put each back again correctly; there are some smaller pigeon-holes within there in some of the layers."

Frank looked at his watch.

"Nearly an hour—can't we venture?"

Mabel hesitated.

"If you like; but is it worth the risk?"

"You don't like, ladye fair, and don't think it worth the risk, I see, so I submit."

"Thursday will very soon be here, and they will go directly after dinner."

"Think what we might find before the hour had passed!"

Mabel shook her head, though she smiled.

"I have not your faith as to that," she said, "and I suppose that is why I am willing to risk nothing."

"Very probably; but you must be of a very sceptical turn of mind, I should say," returned Frank, walking over to the window and standing by it, near where Mabel sat at work. And that work was of a very different fashion and texture from the dainty embroidery likely to employ a Miss Lee, of Lee Manor, be it known to you, fair workers in fine linen and delicate silk. She was diligently sewing up the end of a coarse kitchen towel!

Frank looked at it as he stood there, but

if he noticed it, or the process going on at all, it was merely to think the slender white fingers contrasted to great advantage with the rough dark cloth, and that they were marvellously nimble in their performance.

"I was more than ever sure there was, or had been, something of importance in that old cabinet," he proceeded; "and last night I tried an experiment on purpose."

"And that was what made papa so uneasy when I came back," cried Mabel, reproachfully. "Oh! Mr. Marsden!"

"Nay, the uneasiness was never very great, and passed away entirely in ten minutes; but I was the guilty party, no doubt. I wanted to see if it would be the same if the cabinet was touched when no allusion had been made to it, and we were talking on quite a different matter."

"Why, mamma and I never open the drawers now when he is in the room. We have quite left it off."

"I know it. Now please don't look so very severely, and speak in so condemnatory a tone to an unhappy criminal already plead-

ing guilty. You know it was no matter of curiosity which led me to act as I did—the matter is serious, and a momentary agitation to him *may* restore him to all he has lost."

"Well?" questioned Mabel, only half-reconciled, but willing to be told what had happened.

"Well, we were all chatting away on something—your mother, and he, and all—on some little matter—I almost forget what now. Oh! the flowers and fruit Dr. Armsdaile had brought. He was taking them out of the basket, you remember, when you went for the vase. Well, I suddenly took up the little picture of the church I had brought for you, and walking over to the cabinet while he was watching me, I laid my hand on one of the drawers and asked if I might not put it in."

"And what did he do?" cried Mabel, breathlessly. It seemed to her, in her cautious care and constant watchfulness over the childish invalid, that Frank had practised a very venturesome experiment, and risked committing a dire offence.

"He called out quite loudly to me to come

back, and tried to get out of his chair—did, with your mother's ready assistance, for I wanted to see what he would do, and did not stir. He came quite close up, still telling me to come away, pushed my hand off quite angrily, and began patting the cabinet, as—as he does you sometimes," Frank said, hastily, and with a slight flush on his cheek—"and then began murmuring the old story of its being quite safe, and not to be touched; some one must have it some day, but not he—he never—and that it was there safe—safe, and to be kept so. You know exactly how he would go on, and he did so for some time, the same thing over and over, every now and then touching the cabinet, and feeling at the drawers. I had some difficulty in making my peace with him, I assure you, and was eyed very suspiciously for a long time after."

"Of course," said Mabel, half-indignantly.

"And served me right, too, you would add, but that your sound sense forbids. Well, I would do it again, and more if necessary, to find out the truth in this matter. I would even—who on earth is that detestable fellow

daring to stare at you in that way?" broke off Frank, suddenly, and winding up his sentence with hot and angry vehemence.

Mabel rose and looked out at the window.

"Oh! that is our new neighbour," she answered quietly, but with peculiar emphasis; "a very attractive-looking being, isn't he?"

"He had better not let me see him using his eyes so offensively in this direction again," said Frank, still boiling over with indignation.

"He seems particularly interested in us, for he always stares in that way at the house, whether anyone is visible or not."

"I have never seen the fellow before."

"No, he has only been settled there a day or two, I believe, and very sorry I am he is there now. I would rather have had no neighbours at all, and such a one as that is by no means desirable. I wish the house had stopped empty, though I suppose that is selfish and wrong of me."

"Who is the man?" and Frank with difficulty forbore prefixing an epithet more emphatic than polite to the noun.

"I don't know, nor does Deborah, who shares your horror of him, and says he is a 'drunken beast'—for which I lectured her," added Mabel, looking very pretty as she spoke.

"Deborah's quite right, I should say—the man has a most disreputable face, whoever he may be."

The man was Tony Hicks!

CHAPTER IV.

IT had been Sarah Lockstone's pleasure that the Castle Neville call should not be returned a day sooner than was absolutely necessary; and she had so well calculated chances and probabilities, that the wished-for "not at home" was the answer given to their footman, and the cards on the massive oak table in the Castle hall were all that the Countess was destined to see of Mrs. Lockstone and her daughter. As regarded the former she was indifferent, but not so with respect to the latter, as a slight compression of her lip when her eye rested on the name showed. All she said was,

"Those people have been in no hurry to return the call you pressed me to make, Harry. The impatience, the anxiety, rather, is all on your side apparently."

"And perfectly *comme il faut*, too, mother,

to use your favourite expression, and quite after your own heart, I should imagine, in all ways," returned Harry, who had chanced to accompany his mother that day, and who now stood with Sarah's card in his hand, apparently studying every letter with great intentness.

"When you have quite finished learning how to spell proper names, and *very* common ones, too, I will trouble you to return that bit of pasteboard to its proper place in my shell, Harry," observed the Countess, very significantly, and with some touch of asperity in her tone.

The good-humoured young man laughed, coloured a little, and flung it down.

"There is prompt and ready obedience for you, mother—deserving reward, I am sure you will acknowledge. Give it me by telling me what your next move is to be?"

"To my dressing-room, Henry."

"Nay, you knew well enough——"

"You may follow me, if you choose," interrupted the Countess; and as she spoke, she gave a scarcely perceptible glance to some

of the servants who were lingering about the hall, occupied in arranging lately discarded hats, whips, &c.

"No need to enlighten the servants' hall sooner than is absolutely necessary with your sudden *furore* for this *bourgeoise* paragon, who so rarely deigns to exhibit her irresistible charms," observed Lady Avonsdale, as she seated herself on the sofa in her dressing-room, and signed to her son, who had closely followed her, to close the door.

"Always supposing I have a *furore* for her, my dear mother—which I have not acknowledged yet," returned Harry, smiling.

"Precisely because you are conscious it exists, Harry; if there was no reality in it, we should hear enough about it. So far as I am concerned, I wish we did. I don't like the idea of such an alliance for you at all."

"Mother mine, at what a speed your thoughts are travelling," cried Harry, almost laughing, though he looked a little pleased, notwithstanding; "far faster than mine have ever dreamed of going, and as yet there seems but little probability of her giving me a

chance of seeing her again, much less of anything serious, if you are so in alluding to it. Why, I have not met her three times."

"How very accurately you keep your account," said his mother, smiling. "She is certainly not very anxious for *my* acquaintance, it would seem."

"Or for mine either—of that I am very certain. I have called twice since the shooting, and never been admitted."

"Is it a consciousness of her real inferiority, I wonder, or an absurd affectation of indifference, that induces her to throw such difficulty in the way of our acquaintance?" queried the Countess.

"Neither in my opinion," answered Harry, promptly.

"What then?" asked she, curiously.

"A determination that if you do once know her, it shall not be so easy for you to drop the acquaintance; and I think she is perfectly right."

"Of course you do," returned Lady Avonsdale, satirically. "I should call it insufferable presumption; but I can hardly believe she

would be sufficiently up in such matters to have an idea of the kind."

Harry did not answer this time. He kept his own opinion still, but thought his mother might be more likely to take the course he desired she should if she did not share it with him. He presently asked,

"What is your next move? Tell me now, mother, pray."

"Upon my word I don't know—I should say to do nothing, and just leave or send a card on the eve of our going to town. I can't see what else it would be fitting to do."

"Then I think you had better not have called at all. Have we not a dinner coming off soon?"

"Now, Harry, I am willing to go some lengths to indulge you in this matter, but as to having the Merestown attorney and his family sitting down to dinner with our ordinary guests, it is entirely out of the question—not to be thought of for a moment."

Harry shrugged his shoulders and kept silence. In his heart he thought Sarah Lockstone a far more imposing, not to say noble-

looking person than most of the girls usually to be seen at one of the grand dinners at Castle Neville; but he thought it might be better policy to refrain from saying so.

"Well, what can you propose next?" asked his mother, after a minute's pause.

"Nay, my dear mother, my proposals seem so unlucky, I think I had best leave it with you, always supposing you *will* propose something—that is a stipulation."

"The misfortune is, Harry, we both object to the other's suggestions," answered his mother, half smiling. "Understand, I should not mind the girl so much if it were not the father and mother," and Lady Avonsdale sighed despondingly, as though they were indeed too much for her.

"I'm afraid we can't quite ignore their existence just at present."

"No, that's just it. Some time hence one possibly might, to a degree, but not now," and the Countess threw open the folds of the cloak she still kept wrapped round her, and tapped the floor impatiently with a foot which was still both small and pretty.

"If it was summer one could manage the thing easily enough; but I'm afraid it would hardly do even for archery now."

"Do not the Raymonds and Olivia lunch here next week?" asked Harry, carelessly.

"Yes. The very thing! The people shall be asked to meet them. You are not quite *bête* after all, Hotspur Harry. But tell me, you are quite sure the Raymonds would not object?"

"Positive, as regards Sir Charles; and as to his wife, she would call on the cook if Livy set her the example, I believe," returned Harry, laughing.

"Nonsense! Well, I must just speak to your father about it first, and then the note shall be sent," and Lady Avonsdale rang for her maid, and Harry went whistling off to his own bachelor quarters a story higher up, and determined to make another attempt to see the singular, striking beauty who had made so great an impression on him, directly he knew the note had been despatched.

He kept his resolution, and two days afterwards once again galloped up the avenue leading to the Manor House.

This time fortune favoured him; before he had turned into the sweep leading up to the door he caught a glimpse of a female figure at the opposite end, occupied with educating a great dog apparently, and without a moment's hesitation he rode forward, and found, as he expected, that it was Sarah Lockstone herself.

Very handsome, certainly, she looked, as she turned a little round, with a look of half-surprise, half-haughty displeasure, on her face, which was only partly hidden by the wide hat—fashionable in those days as in these—which her exertions with the dog had displaced. One hand was on the collar by which she was holding him—a beautiful creature of the St. Bernard breed—and with the other she was twisting up a lock of her magnificent black hair, which had escaped from its fastening, and hung below her waist.

The young man had admired her before, but now, as he looked on her, she seemed to him beyond admiration, in all the flush of her majestic beauty. To some she might have appeared repellent, almost forbidding, in spite

of that, but not so to Harry Neville, and he fearlessly gazed on her fine haughty face, as he bent to her with an expression on his own sufficiently betokening his sentiments. For about a minute Sarah suffered, and in a measure returned his stare, for such it decidedly was, though of by no means an offensive character; then she bowed coldly, and turning partly away from him, observed in an icy voice,

"Mr. Neville, I believe?"

"Yes, Miss Lockstone, though I was afraid a moment ago that you had altogether forgotten both my name and my existence," and he sprang from his horse to her side, and threw the bridle to his groom. "I have called here several times since I had the pleasure of meeting you at the Merestown ball, but was always denied admittance."

Sarah did not reply, but she looked up at him curiously, and as he caught a glimpse of her face and its expression, he added, smiling,

"And I shrewdly suspect such would have been my fate to-day, had I not happily caught sight of you here, and boldly deter-

mined to obtain a reception of some sort."

"And you have succeeded," observed his companion, somewhat drily. "Are you satisfied?"

"No, I am not at all," returned Harry, frankly and boldly; "I want more than half a dozen formal words, and looks that tell me to vanish more quickly than I came. I want permission to have some pleasant conversation."

Sarah smiled the old hard smile, but she did not turn towards him this time, and only said, as though to conclude his sentence,

"To while away an idle afternoon as well as I can."

"No—on my word, no," Harry answered, earnestly. "I had no idea of killing time by coming here—it's a pastime I am very often reduced to, I admit," he added, smiling; "but I did not ride over here for that, but to see you, if I could."

Sarah stopped in her onward course, for they had both begun walking along the sweep as they talked, and turning suddenly round, confronted him with a curious, almost defiant look of inquiry.

"And what possible object can it be to the Earl's son whether he sees the country attorney's daughter or not?" she demanded, imperiously, in a mocking tone, after scanning his face for a moment or two.

Harry, no whit abashed, returned her gaze with interest, and answered quietly,

"Because the Earl's son admires the attorney's daughter, and wishes to improve his acquaintance with her."

She fixed her dark piercing eyes on him again as he spoke, but those honest blue ones of his were not the least tempted to quail before them. Sarah perceived it. A strange smile passed over her face.

"Be it so if you will, Harry Neville; but remember, further knowledge of me is of your *own* seeking."

"Assuredly," Harry answered, at once attracted by the singularity of her manner and address, and charmed at the permission extorted. "But I began to fear I was doomed for aye to seek in vain, and that you were vowed to the strictest seclusion."

Sarah smiled a somewhat grim smile, but

not the habitual one; there was something in the fresh young nature, the honest oneness of purpose in the young man, that partially disarmed her satire. She was not very sure if she really trusted or liked it, but it was new, and she had no objection, since it was so forced on her, to study it, for awhile at least.

"Why wouldn't you let me in before?" he asked presently, as she continued silent; "I know you were at home each time."

"Am I bound to tell you?"

"No; only I should like to know whether you honoured me—our family—specially with the distinction of non-admittance; because I have an idea that you did, and I should very much like to know why, if you will tell me."

"Ay. You ask more humbly now, and have a better chance of hearing the secret, *if* there were one. It was simply that one does not care for the passing acquaintance of those who, their curiosity satisfied, would be as eager to drop as they were originally to make it. What say you?"

"That, so far as I am concerned, you are quite wrong," returned the young man,

earnestly. "I called because I wished to see, know more of you, and this I hope I shall be permitted to do now?"

"I have said so," she replied, impatiently.

Harry looked at her inquiringly. Why did she seem to regret, and wish to curtail the implied compliments to herself, which are so welcome, so greedily caught at by other girls. He should find out in time. Meanwhile, he liked her none the worse for it, and was more anxious than ever to secure some sort of intimacy with her.

"That is a noble dog," he observed, after a pause; "what do you call him?"

"Charon."

"What a quaint name!"

"Appropriate in reverse fashion I considered when I chose it. He—that is, his race—often pilot the dead back to life."

"True; but the notion would never have suggested itself to me. Have you ever seen the monastery?"

"Merestown in its length and breadth has bounded the journeys of its lawyer's daughter hitherto—it may be that I may go there, and

to many another unknown land—to me—at some time or other."

"I have been once—I slept one night there, and I am not sure that I should care for going again. But the dogs are splendid," and he put his hand on the head of the one now stalking between them.

"Don't," said Sarah, quietly, but firmly; "he has been disobedient, and is to have no caress till he has done his duty."

The dog seemed to understand the meaning of her words, for he looked wistfully up in her face with his large eyes, and slightly moved his long fringed tail.

"No, Charon, it shall be done," she said, and he hung his head despondingly.

"He seems to be in perfect training," Harry said as he observed this. "What is his offence?"

"Not very serious; but to be redeemed, nevertheless. Stop here, sir," and she laid her glove by the side of a large rhododendron then coming into exquisite beauty, and moved on with her companion.

They had not gone many paces when she

turned, passing close to the dog, who whined a little, and gently swayed the tip of his tail.

"No—that will not do. I will have nothing, sir. You are *not* to know me."

"You will hardly manage to teach him that," said Harry, in surprise.

"Not to recognise me—of course I shall, I mean to do it," and she went up to him with a little leather thong, she wore twisted round her wrist, in the act to chastise him. He cowered, and whined a little, and young Neville eagerly interposed in his behalf.

"Oh! don't whip him, Miss Lockstone, pray don't. How can you expect him to be false to the best instincts of a dog's nature?"

"I don't. The first and best instinct is obedience to their owner, and that obedience I intend to exact. At as little cost as may be to the dog, but I will have it," and she administered a cut or two with the thong. "Now, Charon, understand, you are not to move when I pass—to look on me as a stranger," and she took the same turn again. "Yesterday he persisted in coming to me with the glove. I have broken him of that, you see."

"Yes, but that is a more legitimate piece of instruction. All dogs can learn that. You want to give Charon a lesson in deceit."

"So entirely human a virtue, you think it best to leave it the exclusive privilege of bipeds?" she questioned, turning sharply on him with her piercing gaze.

"A privilege they would be well quit of, in my estimation," Harry answered, and there could be little doubt of his hearty sincerity, from his tone, as he spoke.

"Agreed," Sarah Lockstone slowly answered, after scanning him again somewhat curiously. "But I am not inclined to attempt convincing them of it. My ambition for success in education is limited to my dog, you see."

"And you don't deserve it there, if you want to instruct him in practices his whole nature revolts against. Hypocrisy is exclusively a human quality, as you observed."

"We have a fair share of brute instincts," she answered, sarcastically, "and I shall try if I can't give some of ours to one dog, at least."

"What can be the good of such a lesson,

even if you succeed?" asked Harry, after watching another failure and another chastisement. He could not bear to witness the latter, beautiful as she looked while administering it; there was an unflinching determination about the action that made it cruel, in his estimation, as the thing was so contrary to the dog's nature. The punishment for any other failure in obedience he would not have regarded, and he looked, as he felt, vexed at her persistence, as he asked the question.

"The good? Oh! the object, you mean. That it is impossible for me to say. Possibly I may never wish to have the lesson practised as a really useful experiment when learned, but I may. At any rate, it is my pleasure to teach it, and I will."

"I wish you wouldn't," blurted forth Harry. He had longed to say it before, and now the words were uttered almost before he was aware of them himself. She started, and looked quickly into his face with that searching look of hers many found it hard to encounter, and very disagreeable in any case. Harry

Neville did not—he rather liked it than otherwise. Besides, it gave him a capital opportunity of studying the faultless features and brilliant eyes he was learning to admire more and more, in spite of Charon's lessons. Sarah's answer was on her lips as she turned to him, but as she looked she changed her mind; a faint, very faint blush passed over her face, and she slightly laughed.

"Nay, Mr. Neville, you plead for admission to my companionship, and on the very first occasion would interfere between me and my dog. Is that quite fair?"

"I thought what you are trying to do not so, you see, Miss Lockstone, and I have a very John Bull horror of that sort of thing, or I would not have perilled my newly-gained pleasure by any such audacity. Forgive me."

"Very well. But, remember, I do as I choose with Charon. I don't treat him badly. Brutes are better worth than their masters; but I must have obedience. However, I'll not exact it any more to-day on this particular point, for I would not on any account shock your sensitive nerves, Mr. Neville, and in ten

minutes I am going out driving," she added, mischievously.

"That means I am to make my parting bow, I suppose?"

"In five minutes, yes. Will you go in for that time, or has pacing up and down this road satisfied you that your call has been rewarded at last?"

"If it authorises me to repeat it with as good result, I answer certainly," returned Harry, boldly; for her satire fell stingless on his honest desire to improve his knowledge of her character, which her conduct of this morning had by no means diminished. "Do you never ride?" he added, as a bend in the road brought his own horses, which the groom was pacing up and down, within view.

"What a question! Do you *really* forget that till within these few months I had no chance of mounting anything but the broken rocking-horse some old aunt or uncle of my mother's sent us as children. Old Rachel has it all to herself now, up in that weary garret!"

She murmured the last words to herself,

with the old smile on her lips, and so low her companion failed to catch their meaning.

"I never thought about it," he replied to the first part of her speech. "But is it any reason you should not ride now you have the chance; a rocking-horse well used isn't so bad a beginning, I assure you, to equestrian exploits. Many a tumble have Charley and I had off ours, before we were suffered to mount the Shetland—Neville's leavings; he having been promoted to a fourteen hand long before."

"And how many times were your necks in peril on that?" asked Sarah, with some degree of interest. The idea of riding had occurred to her before now, and she rather liked it.

"Oh! I can hardly remember; we were a fearless pair, and under the 'special providence' of hunters, &c., I should imagine, for we got into plenty of scrapes during our reckless gallops and leaps. Fred was far more careful, and we despised him accordingly. Charley is a capital horsewoman now—but about yourself, why should you not ride?"

"I really don't know."

"You are not afraid?"

"Hardly, I should fancy," and her lip curled contemptuously.

"No, I was quite certain you would not be, so don't be indignant. I should think it was a feeling you had never yet experienced?" he added, inquiringly.

"Not a bad conclusion, considering you have seen me once in a ball-room, and for some twenty minutes on a carriage sweep," Sarah observed, ironically.

"You may laugh at what I say, if you will, but I believe I am right. You don't answer me. Have you ever felt fear?"

"You are discerning, Mr. Neville," she replied, mockingly; "but why require confirmation to such a sapient judgment? However, I will be merciful. I don't remember ever fearing anything—except——"

"What?" cried Harry, eagerly.

"What you would call *ennui*, what I incline to christen the *bore* of living," and for once Sarah Lockstone spoke out her own real thought, and let another glimpse for one instant beyond the well-secured barrier of her inmost feelings.

Harry looked at her earnestly, sympathisingly, but she gave him no chance of showing his sentiments in any other way. Her look and voice changed in an instant, and she said haughtily,

"The five minutes are gone, Mr. Neville, and I am going. Good morning."

"Oh! stop one moment," pleaded the young man, earnestly; "will you let me teach you to ride? I don't believe you will want much instruction, but if you would let me, I should be so proud, so happy."

"Would you?"

A curious light shone on Sarah's face for a moment as she spoke those two words—not incredulously, not mockingly this time, but with most peculiar emphasis.

"Yes, indeed—there is nothing I should like better."

"Once again, Harry Neville, and for the *last* time, remember, this intimacy is none of my wishing, or of my seeking. You yourself force it on me."

"Do you mean it is unwelcome?—an intrusion?" the young man answered, at once hurt and puzzled at her words.

"No, it is simply indifferent to *me*, I believe," she returned coldly; "but I wish you, and all belonging to you, to understand that I am not an active party in this matter. If you turn riding-master for me, it is your own express choice—no wish or desire of mine influencing you in any way."

"Is she afraid people will say she is trying to catch me, or what, I wonder?" thought Harry to himself, as she was thus addressing him. "I should have thought her above that littleness; and I'm sure she is. Well, I'll find out her meaning some day—at any rate, it shan't be my fault if I don't."

Aloud he answered,

"I thought we had agreed as to that long ago—indeed, I can't well see how there can be a doubt about it. You have taken *ultra* care there should not be, I should say. I may show you how to ride, then?"

"If you will," was the rather ungracious response.

"I will send over Charley's old hack to-night, and come and give you the first lesson to-morrow."

"A first lesson to-morrow, and welcome, but not on anyone else's horse, if you please."

"Why? She is as quiet as a lamb, is never used, and would be just the thing."

"No matter—I cannot think of using her."

"What is to be done, then?"

"I will ask if there is no horse fit for the purpose about the stables here."

"May I see?"

"If you like."

"Will you give me *carte blanche* in the matter?" he eagerly asked.

She nodded; and allowing him to take her hand in his own anxiously-extended palm, bade him good morning once again, and took her way into the house; while young Neville marched off, eager and happy, to the stables.

As he passed the rhododendron, he saw Charon, still sitting on guard over Sarah's glove, disconsolate and unhappy, and no efforts of his could prevail on the faithful creature to stir from the spot, or win more than a slight wag of the tail, and troubled glance of his expressive brown eyes.

"She'll forget all about him, I should not

wonder, and he may have to sit there till to-morrow, poor brute! My interference did him more harm than good after all—for the time, at any rate. Never mind, perhaps I'll get her to give up her odd notion after all. I am sure she would not hurt him, or anything else really. I daresay she is very bored, too. Well, riding will give her something to do, at any rate, and she'll forget her whim about you, old fellow, perhaps."

Such was Harry Neville's soliloquy while he stood looking on the fine animal as he sat motionless on the grass, one paw now on the glove, as though he feared what Harry's intentions regarding it might be.

After a moment's more thought, the young man turned back to the house, and calling to the servant just opening the door to the carriage which had driven round, bid him give his compliments to Miss Lockstone, and tell her her dog was still watching the glove.

Sarah herself heard the words as she was coming down the stairs, and a smile curved her lip. She went round, however, and released Charon by one word, to his intense

joy, and then she gave a glance to the high elms before the stables, among the trunks of which young Neville was now disappearing, and as she walked slowly on to the carriage she thought,

"Why did I take all that trouble about him? What is it to me? If the moth will come to its death in the candle, it must. Need I burn my fingers to save it? Pshaw! It is his own seeking; but the boy has an honest face; he and that pale-faced girl, wearing herself out as the old man's slave yonder in Newman's Buildings, have the same look—no half-truths in either. Well, it will be a new study to me. He is bent on running his head into a strange realm, dangerous to him, so let it be! Fools! Honest fools both, though!" she concluded, as she stepped into the carriage and was driven fast away—away to the old house in the High Street, where her father was shut up, moodily ruminating in the dusty den, where no clients ever came now.

The old place had a strange fascination for her still, though of a totally different character

from that which induced Stephen Lockstone himself to resort there day after day, week after week. He had gone first in the hope to escape from himself, he continued the habit in that of escaping from another by finding what would secure him from all danger from that other—place him in safety from all threats, all fears. Morning after morning he went forth with the same hope, to return evening after evening disappointed.

CHAPTER V.

HOW much has been said, sung, written on Time! Poets, philosophers, pleasure-seekers, Heathens, Christians, all and severally, have they not made that intangible something —ever existing, ever passing away—the subject of their song, their essays, their abuse, their speculative theories, their sermons! Yet each generation, as it succeeds the former, has to learn for itself those many lessons, which, but for human nature's innate horror and universal rejection of second-hand experience, the wisdom of their forefathers might teach less painfully!

Who believes in childhood that time can ever pass too swiftly?—that a birthday may be not a fête day, but a fast—a fast from all joy—a mournful comma in our life, whence to glance back at the last passage of it with agonizing tears of sorrow and desolate realiza-

tion of bereavement, or with bitter repentance of wrong, sin, shame, that no after-act can ever make amends for or wipe out? Who in the heyday of youth believes—in realization, at any rate—that there is indeed "nothing new under the sun," that other prospects have been as fair—fairer than theirs—till the withering blight and cruel frost of misfortune, disappointment, came—as it *will* come again, probably, to *them?* Who, save, perhaps, a very few, the early-gathered of the earth, who leave it ere the first heaven-given freshness of their natures has been all brushed off by contact with the world, believe, while breathing only the balmy air, warmed by the sunshine of prosperity, sweetened by the incense of love and friendship, that these will, must all pass away, and, as it will seem, before they have been able really to enjoy them; while the end will then be looked for as so welcome that it will seem long in coming? Who, in short, would be content to accept and appropriate the experiences of life from others, or realize in all its full, deep meaning, till their own individual experience was well nigh over,

the truth that "the day of death is indeed better than the day of our birth?"

And happy, very happy, is it that we are so constituted, or what would become of the world and of us? The old can complain of the scant effect their past fate has had on the young placed in like circumstances. Franklin may assert that "experience keeps a dear school, but fools will learn in no other!" But what sort of a world would this be robbed of the buoyancy, the hope, and faith of youth? Not the most cheerful, certainly, nor probably a shade better intrinsically than at present. So let each young heart read of Time's winged hours—his lead-weighted feet; sing of the golden minutes, his flower-strewn path, with the same light heart and unawakened conviction as of yore. They will understand and take it to heart all soon enough! Too soon, probably!

Frank Marsden had already learned both that the same space of time may be computed very differently by the clock and by your own feelings, and that sixty minutes in one case may wear its slow length out till half a day

seems over, while sixty minutes in another pass away like as many seconds. The latter weeks of his present stay in Merestown had flown away in the latter fashion, while the intervening days to the Thursday when a final examination of the cabinet was to be entered upon, appeared each of triple length, and, as he began to think, would never pass away at all. The fact was, his hardly-restrained impatience was ever finding some fresh food to grow upon, while he was altogether certain now that, but for that one chance, the cause of the Lees was a hopeless one.

He arrived at No. 5, Newman's Buildings on that morning so early that Mabel, the only person in the sitting-room at that hour, as was usual, asked in some trepidation and alarm if he had breakfasted.

"Oh! yes, thank you, an hour ago, at least. How soon will Dr. Armsdaile come for them, do you think?"

Mabel laughed.

"Not yet. Just look at the clock! He has not breakfasted yet, I am tolerably sure,

and, if he has, won't be here till he knows papa is up, and has had his luncheon, though they are going now before dinner."

"Why, that will make it near twelve!" cried Frank, in dismay.

"Yes—why, do you think we shall not have ample time the whole afternoon to rout the poor old cabinet?"

"I would rather have been able to begin at once."

"Why, you unconscionable being!" cried Mabel, laughing "a whole day given to this poor little cabinet!"

"Well, I am at least willing to err on the safe side now, you see. Before you abused me for wanting to risk the thing in an hour or two."

"I wish I could feel as sanguine as you feel," said poor Mabel, after a pause somewhat disconsolately; "but even if there is anything —what can it be to affect things now?"

"Ah! That is just my puzzle; and I believe it is my lawyer-like curiosity as to that, which makes me doubly impatient in the matter."

"You say it has all been too safely managed to dispute—all fair——"

"Not by any means either honest or fair, but sufficiently so to make this villainous man tolerably safe—just within the mark where one might have caught him. He has been as cunning as a fox throughout. I can trace all the workings through years and years up to this one object as easily as possible; only—I wonder why it was delayed so long, and why he persecuted your father when once he had turned him out."

"Yes, it seemed such gratuitous annoyance to force himself on us; when there was really no object in it whatever."

"I should like to know if he is aware of anything concealed within that."

"What chance of that is there?"

"A good many if there *is* anything, only I *did* wonder, in that case, how he failed to get it out."

"I cannot think, if there is any paper, it will prove of any great weight. What could it be?"

"As I say, I can form not the shadow of an

idea, but your father's persistence throughout in this business has latterly worked its way into my mind more and more, till I have a deep-seated conviction not only that there is a paper —and one of great importance—but that there is also some secret connected with it all; whether Mr. Lockstone is in that or not, is a question. I incline to believe he is."

"I was going to ask again what can it be," said Mabel, smiling, though a little sadly; "but as I have had your answer to that twice already, I will vary the question a little, and ask—what circumstance or secret could there be, in such a case as this, that could materially change the present state of things?"

"You are only asking what I have asked my own reason a hundred times within the week—till at last I got so savage at losing myself in all sorts of possible and impossible conjectures, that I tried absolutely to shut the door against any further speculations of the kind."

"But you still think there is something?"

"More than ever; and if there be, it is likely enough to prove so strange as to put all

conjecture at defiance, in our present state of ignorance. It must be, if it can materially alter the case as it stands *now*; and there is one of my fears, that it is too late—that if one could have got at that, whatever it is, sometime back, it might have been of inestimable value; but that now it is more than possible it is utterly useless. You see your poor father's delusions in regard to the Manor would quite prevent his seeing that," he added, gently, for he knew how sore a subject the old man's imbecility of intellect still was—how the fond wife and daughter still cheated themselves with the belief that it was but a passing evil, which would be cured in time.

Mabel sighed, but she answered truthfully, though it was very painful to her. "Oh! yes, I am afraid we must not build in any way on that—only it was he who first gave you the idea there might be such a thing, remember," and the latter part of her speech was spoken eagerly and proudly.

Some might have smiled at this. Not so Frank Marsden; he respected too much the filial tenderness from whence it sprung, and

answered heartily, "No doubt of that! We owe the idea to him entirely; and we have to pit against the doubt of its present utility Mr. Lockstone's subsequent conduct."

"Ah! That surely should have great weight. I wish I knew what passed that day I found papa so agitated."

"So do I. But again, we must not reckon too much on that either. Conscience might make a coward of Stephen Lockstone even, without his being in the least aware of the motive power at work—or that he ever possessed such a thing, however blunted."

"Why, Mr. Marsden, you build up walls one moment and knock them down the next!" said Mabel, half laughing. "You have given various reasons for your belief in this secret, and then—so it seems to me at least—have taken great pains to prove they are no reasons at all."

Frank coloured for a moment, and then laughed heartily.

"Thank you for the compliment, my dear Miss Lee. According to your statement I have proved myself a true lawyer—arguing both

sides of the question, and contradicting myself with the utmost self-satisfaction. You could hardly give me greater praise, I suppose. It must argue a most unprejudiced state of mind."

"I am not sure I should think it the best praise if you were called the first lawyer in the United Kingdom," returned Mabel. "Mr. Lockstone has not given me a very elevated idea of the profession."

"No; and I can only wonder you tolerate me so kindly as you do," said Frank, more gravely, as he walked up to the much-talked-of old cabinet, and laid his hand on it. "How I should like to peep into you!" he exclaimed as he did so. "What marvellous secret do you hold, I wonder?"

"A little more patience, and you will know, perhaps."

"Yes, and find it all too late, very likely," and Frank sighed rather moodily as he walked away again. By-and-by he resumed, in a more cheery tone, "Well, I've debated *pros* and *cons*, possibilities, probabilities, and all sorts of may-bes and may-not, long enough. We

shall know in time, as you say, and in this case it is not my fault the seal is not broken at once, instead of turning our mysterious letter over and over. I have had a visit from a staunch friend of yours and your family, Miss Lee."

"Have you? They are not many," Mabel said, but not sadly.

She had never in all the course of her young life been accustomed to those "troops of friends" which usually wait on the rich and well-born, whether in old age or youth, and did not feel the absence of them as a grief or trial.

"Many people would give much for one so sincere as this man. His name is Hernshaw."

"Oh! dear old Reuben! He is a friend, indeed, and an old one, too—as long as I can remember. But what did he want with you? He is in no trouble, I hope?"

"None greater than having to hold on his farm under Mr. Lockstone; but that seems a very weighty one to his reverential feelings for the old family and the true heir, and he came to me, first to know if I was at liberty

to tell him what chance there was of your going back to the Manor; and next, if there was none, how he could get out of his farm without loss, or, rather, without any serious loss. Some he was quite prepared, and rather eager to submit to."

"Yes, I know he cannot bear staying on now, poor fellow," said Mabel, her eyes glistening. "What did you tell him?"

"The truth—that neither I nor anyone else could help him in the matter if Mr. Lockstone would not cancel his lease; and also something which I am afraid he did not relish any more than the other, that my advice was to remain."

"Oh! why?" and Mabel looked both unbelieving and reproachful.

"Because his going could only injure himself; and because he can do much more good to you and those interested in you by remaining, and annoy Mr. Lockstone a good deal more. Will you forgive me for having suggested that, and him for rather catching at, and rejoicing in the idea?" and Frank looked at her mischievously.

Mabel blushed and laughed.

"No—at least, I suppose I ought to scold you both instead; but I am afraid I do not feel very charitably towards that man—yet I try to do so," she added, so simply and earnestly that Frank looked at her, full of admiration. "But what was the special good you meant?"

"Oh! various—one instance I will tell you, he has taken poor old Sawyer into his service, and lets him and his wife live in some seldom-used outhouse."

"Oh! how very glad I am; and how like Reuben!"

"He rather hoped such open disregard to Mr. Lockstone's feelings might so annoy him as to induce him to cancel the lease in a rage —but that object has failed."

"But he would have kept the old man on, I feel sure, wherever he was; and it was very, very kind of him."

"Yes—I am afraid the poor old fellow is more hindrance than help as to real work; the old dame does do a little, though; and if zeal in the service could make amends for

lack of strength and youth, both would achieve wonders, though it was difficult at first to persuade them they were not tenants under the lawyer still. And for that matter so they are, in a manner; but Reuben told me all the pains he took to explain matters to them; and to escape the workhouse is a first blessing in their eyes, poor old souls!"

"Yes, I was so very, very grieved we could do so little—nothing, in fact, for them," said Mabel, sadly.

The Sawyers were the old couple who had lived at the lodge as long, and longer than Mabel could remember, and who had left it in such unceremonious haste on the day when Stephen Lockstone drove up in triumph to take possession; and they had been almost starving since then, and would have quite starved, probably, but for the charitable assistance of some of the Lees' staunchest friends, till the honest farmer stepped in, and took the care and charge of them on his own broad shoulders.

"Here is the carriage at last!" cried Frank, presently, as he descried the doctor's neat little brougham in the distance; and hardly

asking Mabel's leave, and quite forgetting to ask that of Deborah, which was a much more important affair, he ran to the door, and throwing it open, went half way down the little path to meet the welcome arrival as he advanced up it.

"Heyday! Master Frank, you here? I've no room for you in my brougham, sir, though I do want to carry off the whole trio from here to-day."

"No—not Miss Lee!" cried Frank.

"Not Miss Lee, indeed! And why not, I should like to know? What right have you to interfere between me and my little Mabel, eh? No, no, I intend to have every one, and you must do as you can. Get your horse and ride with us, if you are a sensible man," added the good old doctor, who was the least likely of any living mortal to break up a pleasant party.

"Being, as I hope, a sensible man," returned Frank, smiling, "I say no. I intend remaining here, and to keep Miss Lee," he added, determinedly.

Dr. Armsdaile stopped short on the door

step, and looked quickly round, a look that brought the colour into the young man's face, as he hastened to add, "We have a little business matter in hand, sir—only to be managed when we have the field to ourselves."

"Indeed!" answered the doctor, emphasising the interjection very energetically.

"Yes," resumed Frank, resolutely and gravely. "A search for some important papers, which we cannot venture on when the poor old man is here."

"Umph!" grunted the other gentleman, somewhat dissatisfied, as it seemed. "I thought you had ransacked all the papers a thousand times over before now."

"I am afraid I have—all the important ones; but one chance remains, and I am not willing to lose it. Pray say nothing of Miss Lee's going."

"Of course I shan't," returned the doctor, testily. "Pleasure's one thing—business another; but how was I to dream you'd anything of this sort in your heads? There, get out of the way, and let me come in, will you?" and by no means in the best of humours, he

pushed past the young man and hurried into the sitting-room. "So, Miss Mabel, this is the way I am treated, is it? You prefer *tête-à-têtes* with stray young men to a cosy drive—strictly limited to four—in the old doctor's brougham! Nay, nay," he hastily added, as he saw his words had pained her, "I know all about it, little lady! Why, you don't mind what I say, or grudge the old man his joke, do you?" and he fondly stroked the delicate little hand that had been put into his at his entrance. Then, with a glance towards the door, where Frank Marsden still lingered, he whispered in a different tone, "And as to that boy Marsden, why, I'd trust you with him half over the globe, my dear!"

Mabel's embarrassment vanished, and though her cheek had still more of a flush on it than was usual, she looked up with a bright smile.

"Duty before pleasure, you know, as you once wrote in my old copy-book, when I was crying because poor Miss Drayton insisted our lessons must be finished before we went to Meadowlands—don't you remember it? Be-

sides, I had no idea you thought of taking me."

"No more had I, to confess the truth, till just an hour ago, and then Dame Morris suggested packing a little lunch up, as the day was so beautiful, for us all to eat in Birchen Vale; and I thought perhaps it was a sort of thing to suit you, so I said yes, and resolved to be squeezed into a mummy, four in the pill-box, with a good grace."

"How kind—how like you—and Mrs. Morris, too. I am so sorry," said Mabel, earnestly; "but I suppose I must stay."

"Of course—of course, my dear, not a doubt as to that. And now go and see if that good father of yours is nearly ready, I must be seven miles off in half an hour."

Mabel went, found her father already descending the stairs, and Mrs. Lee so nearly ready that she was at the door before Frank had returned from settling the old man comfortably in the carriage. As they went down the walk together, Dr. Armsdaile, who had remained with Mabel, and was now watching their progress from the window, said,

"How well he gets on with them both. Your father's quite fond of him, seemingly."

"Oh! yes, it is such a great comfort, and does him so much good. But I want to tell you something he has just told me about those good Hernshaws," and she hurriedly related the Sawyer story.

Dr. Armsdaile smiled.

"Yes, I knew all about it," he answered; "and I was going to tell you when I had a chance. Did Master Frank tell you how they had been living this last month?" he added, with a curious expression on his face.

"No."

"Ah! I thought not. Well, his trumpeter's not dead yet. Why, on Master Frank's own bounty, little lady; and he allows them so much a week still, and means to continue it. But for that, I don't see how Hernshaw, with all the good-will in the world, could justly keep them on as he has begun. He has a long family of his own, you know—I'm coming," he shouted, as his name was called from without. "But what do you think of Master Frank for that, eh?" and he looked as

if he was determined to know before he went, however impatient the occupiers of his carriage might become.

"How generous, how good," faltered Mabel, with varying colour and trembling voice.

"Oh! I don't say a hundred others mightn't have done the same," corrected he, hastily, as though afraid he had extolled the young man too much. "He's not such a Phœnix as all that. Still, everybody might not. I told you I was coming," he went on, turning sharply round on Marsden, who at that moment came to summon him. "The carriage won't run away without me, there's no fear; and I'm sure you've not tucked either of them up half enough, and I'm not going to do it, I warn you," and so muttering, the good doctor took himself off, after giving Mabel the paternal kiss he had so long accustomed her to receive.

Presently Frank came back laughing.

"Really off at last! A consummation past hoping for, I was beginning to think. What a dear crusty old torment that is, though. He is an older friend of mine than yours, Miss

Lee, so I may venture to abuse him."

"In that way, yes," Mabel answered, smiling; "but beware how you attempt it in reality. He is a friend, indeed. And—and, Mr. Marsden, forgive me, but I must say thank you for the poor old Sawyers. I little thought how great a share you had had in all you were telling me about them," and she would fain have looked her gratitude, but her eyes sought the floor instead, and her voice trembled as she spoke.

Frank coloured and looked annoyed.

"What! has he told you that? I did not think it of him. To make a story out of a mere trifle not worth notice. I am *not* grateful to him for that, Miss Lee—I was not even aware he knew it. However, it is not worth a second thought, especially *now*, when the time for trial has come. Don't let us waste a moment," and he hastily drew out one of the cabinet drawers—an old acquaintance of his—and laid it on the floor.

Mabel soon joined in the work, and drawer after drawer was rapidly extracted and placed in its due order before the old cabinet. A

great many there were, and, as Frank acknowledged, they would be tolerably confusing to any stranger wishing to replace them in a hurry.

"I will take an accurate mental inventory now," he went on, "that I may be equal to the task again, if need be. You were right in assuring me it would not be the work of a minute even with your assistance. What a curious old hiding-place it is! Now for the pigeon-holes."

And as he spoke, they came to the inner drawers, the second tier, as they might be called, behind the others, which were still more intricate as to position and arrangement.

"I should think it must have been constructed for the express purpose of hiding," exclaimed Frank; "is it an old family relic, or where did it come from?"

"I don't know exactly—from somewhere abroad. It is not in any way an heirloom, and that was what made papa's great attachment to it, in preference to anything else, the more extraordinary."

"The more chance that success may crown

our labours. I suppose they will come to an end when—stay—let me look more closely where that queer-looking tube—for it is more like that than a drawer—came from—I shall be puzzled else as to the return process. Oh! I see—ah!—and—yes, it is compact, and hollow behind—there is a secret drawer, at any rate, whatever it may contain."

And they redoubled their labours, till at last everything that any efforts of theirs could remove from the cabinet was extracted, and the shell stood before them like a quaint pile of shelves, with a solid block in the middle. Square, small, and apparently solid, but not really so. It was hollow, as Frank said—there was no doubt about it, as repeated tappings proved.

And now to open it! Ay! there lay the real difficulty—a small one, the young man fancied at first; but as time went on, and he was as far as ever from guessing the "open sesame," his opinion changed.

This then would be the real and great difficulty; and though he and Mabel tried, ex-

amined, and suggested till brains and fingers were alike weary, they had got not one step nearer their object when Deborah arrived to lay the cloth for dinner.

As she opened the door she stood aghast, and, hardly waiting to deposit the tray in the nearest chair, threw up her arms and exclaimed,

"Are you two gone clean crazed, Miss Mabel? What will he say?"

"Nothing, my good Deborah," Frank answered quietly, "just because he'll know nothing about it—unless you tell him," he added, smiling.

"That you know I shan't, Mr. Marsden; but as for his not knowing," and she shook her head warningly, "he'll do that, will the master, if you put them all back, just as they were to the very crack, as one may say."

"Well, we'll hope not, Deborah," returned Frank cheerfully; "but we must risk it in any case, for we are looking for something we must find if possible before they come home."

"But you'll let Miss Mabel have her dinner first, I hope, sir, and perhaps take some

yourself," was Deborah's somewhat indirect reply.

"Yes, please, if you will give me some, and full justice I shall do to it, I promise you," the young man answered; and giving up all hope of further progress in their researches till the meal was over, he ran out of the room and up to Mr. Lee's dressing-room to wash the dust from his hands, so perfectly at home had he become of late in the house.

In spite of his threat to Deborah, neither he nor Mabel made much of a dinner, however; both were too anxious to resume the task, so near its completion as they hoped, and eagerly returned to it directly Deborah had disappeared with the cloth.

But in vain did Frank knock and Mabel press her slender fingers over every square inch of that inaccessible centre to the old cabinet. It stood firm, smooth, unyielding as ever; and as the afternoon grew older and older, and there were still no signs of success, Frank exclaimed, despairingly,

"This is the most mysterious, incomprehensible thing! I flattered myself I could

find the spring to any hiding-place of the kind ever invented, and here is a lesson to my self-conceit."

"You are sure there is a hollow?"

"Positive, and that it is a hiding-place," and poor Frank sighed.

"Look at the shadows!" cried Mabel in alarm. "They will soon be home; it is getting quite late. Let us put the drawers back?" she added pleadingly.

"With all my heart; any more trials would be equally useless, unless by a chance hit—and I doubt our arriving at that here. I suppose," he added, hesitating, "you would not like me to break it open? Look, just here; with a small hammer I could do it in an instant, and no one be a whit the wiser, the drawers once replaced. May I try?"

"Oh, no, no!" and poor Mabel took his arm between both her hands in her terror. "Pray, pray do not! Nothing could compensate for the state it might put him in."

Frank did not agree in this, believing that less even than might be hidden within would more than compensate so easily repaired a damage, but he did not say so; he could not

with that lovely, pleading face looking up into his. He only sighed again, though he smiled, too, and said, "I long to do it."

"Yes," and Mabel smiled too, now, "but you will not; help me to put the drawers back instead?"

"In an instant; let me just sketch a plan of it first." And he rapidly drew an outline of the interior in his pocket-book as he spoke.

"We can try again, perhaps, before long," Mabel observed, comfortingly, as he finished, and closing the clasp, ran his hand for the last time over the obstinate panel.

"Yes; a week more or less will make no difference now, I suppose," he answered despondently. "If it is too late, it is—hark! who was that?"

He and Mabel had both started, and now looked round the little square room in dismay. A mocking laugh had broken upon Frank's sentence—low, but distinct, and as it seemed at his very elbow. No one was in the room evidently, no one in the tiny plots of ground either before or behind—yet a laugh there had been; both had heard it. Who could it be?

CHAPTER VI.

HARRY NEVILLE'S inspection of the Manor stables was by no means satisfactory. Not a saddle horse was to be found in them, except a hack or two which the grooms rode when sent on messages. This state of affairs by no means pleased the eager young man; and he persisted in his researches from stall to stall, loose box to loose box, always with a like result. The grooms were exceedingly astonished at his close investigation, but they knew well who he was, and the head man no sooner saw what was going on than he hastened to attend upon him personally.

"Why, there's not a single thing in your stables fit for anything but draught," exclaimed Harry, at last, half angrily.

"No, sir. It's quite true, and a rum sort of a stud, too, for the place," he concluded, after a second's deliberation.

"Why don't you make it better, then?" retorted the young man, turning hotly on him.

But in no way daunted or dismayed, Joseph responded quietly,

"'Tisn't exactly my place to do it, sir—it wouldn't suit here, sir; and even if I did, why, what would be the good?"

"Does nobody ride?"

"Not as I've ever seen, sir. As to Mr. Lockstone, he'd cut a queer sort of figure across a nag, I'm thinking. Town-bred folks aren't much up to that sort of thing, I reckon."

"Is there nothing that will carry a lady?—no quiet, gentle-paced old horse that would do to practise on?"

"No, sir, not any," and the groom shook his head.

"What's in here?" and Harry had already entered a low shed, rather than a stable, where stood a bay pony, with slender limbs and beautifully set head, fine eyes and curved nostrils. It had been a beauty once, but its best days were over. "What's this? The most promising thing I've seen yet, at any rate. This will do!"

"Well, I beg your pardon, sir," returned Joseph, humbly, but doubtfully, "that's not altogether belonging here now; it's—at least it *was*—the other people's, you see, sir, and Mr. Hernshaw bought it, and Mr. Tuffnell had it up here for a bit; and the fact is, sir," and he scratched his head to help out his difficulty, "I don't think Mr. Lockstone knows she's here at all."

"Well, my good fellow, that's no concern of mine or yours; but I've no doubt Mr. Hernshaw will lend the pony for Miss Lockstone's use, so it had better stay up here now it is here, and I'll ride round by Meadowlands and settle it with him."

"Please, sir," still hesitated Joseph, "Mr. Tuffnell, would you mind speaking to him first about it, please?"

"Why, who the deuce is Tuffnell?" asked Harry, impetuously. To have a new obstacle rising up just as he thought each overcome in turn was provoking, certainly.

"Only the bailiff, sir, close by, at the home farm. 'Twon't take you a minute, sir. This way, if you'd please to come," and Joseph

crossed with great alacrity to a little side-gate leading through the shrubberies at the back of the house.

"I don't please," Harry answered, half-amused now; "but as it pleases you to make all these difficulties, my man, why, they must be solved somehow," and he followed the little quick steps of the groom with hasty, impatient strides.

Arrived in sight of Mr. Tuffnell's, that gentleman himself appeared from the opposite point of the road, walking hastily towards his home; and Harry, who knew the man perfectly by sight, instantly shouted to him, exclaiming as he came within earshot,

"I say, Mr. Tuffnell, what's all this mystery about the bay pony up there? A neat little mare in her day, but fit for little now."

Mr. Tuffnell looked puzzled, and Joseph hastened to explain rather obsequiously,

"Mr. Hernshaw's, sir. Mr. Neville was thinking of riding up there to ask about it."

"Oh!" and Tuffnell glanced his comprehension to the groom while asking young Neville, "Did you want the pony for anything, sir?"

"Yes, certainly, to let Miss Lockstone take riding-lessons on."

Tuffnell looked as if he would very much have liked to practise that very expressive style of whistle so popular among a certain class of men and boys, as expressive of surprised assurance that that cock won't fight at any price; only young Mr. Neville stood there before him, so he refrained, merely saying respectfully,

"I am afraid I can give no answer as to that, sir. Indeed, if Hernshaw knew it had been into those stables again, now, I hardly know what he'd do to me. You won't mention having seen her there, will you, sir?" he added, insinuatingly; "and I'll have her down here within the hour. You bring her, Joe, will you?" and the man was off like a shot, while young Neville answered,

"Not I. It's nothing to me whether the pony was in the king's or the devil's stables; but why in the world there should be such a fuss over it, passes my comprehension."

"Thank you, sir. I really should feel it a great kindness if you'd say nothing to Mr.

Hernshaw about finding her up at the Manor. As you say, sir, it doesn't really matter the least what stable the horse is in, still, you see, Mr. Hernshaw has his own notions on some points, and as he sent her up on the understanding I should keep her here under my own eye, why, I'd rather he didn't know I let her be there even for a day. She's not been there a week as it is, and it was only because I'd a press for room that I gave her in charge to Joe for a day or so."

"Very well," returned Harry, good-naturedly; "it's all right, I'll not betray you, and so good day to you, Mr. Tuffnell," and he hurried away in search of his own horses, thinking, as he went, there had been *very* "much ado about nothing."

His groom was still parading the sweep, with that exasperatingly exact obedience to the letter of his orders which is the simply exceptional practice of servants, and that only when the result is most aggravating to their masters. Harry was about to administer a somewhat sharp reprimand to the man for not using his eyes and following him to the home

farm, for he was annoyed at the failure of his scheme up to the present moment, and impatient to try his fortune at Meadowlands, when Charon, who had been lying by the front door ever since his mistress's departure, solemnly advanced towards him, and put his tawny muzzle on his arm.

The angry words died on the young man's lips as he looked in the expressive face of the dog, at once so intelligent and so beseeching was the look of the big earnest eyes fixed on his own.

"Poor old fellow!—poor Charon!—what is it, old dog? I've not got your mistress, nor," he added, in a lower tone, as he caressed the faithful creature, "any power over her either, Charon. I wish I had, and that you could teach me the best way to win it. You would if you could, I believe," and then Harry Neville jumped into his saddle and rode straight away to Meadowlands, along the bridle path so well and so fondly remembered by Mabel Lee.

The afternoon was a glorious one of early spring. The sun, unusually powerful for the

season, and still some distance from his Western bed, was playing a merry and rapid game of bo-peep with some soft billowy clouds that were sailing fast over the sky, a fleet of white-sailed messengers bent on some hasty and important mission to the East, apparently, whither the wind, not one whit a sharp or frosty one, was helping pleasantly to waft them. And though the trees were still bare, their trunks and twining branches, tipped with buds already full almost to bursting, and seeming visibly to swell as they were looked on, threw a pretty trellis-work of shadow, bare though it was, on the path; while the hedge-rows themselves were already covered with the fresh green mantle the spring throws over them, and here and there a May-thorn dotting the meadows hung out its tiny flags of welcome to the coming season, and had already unfurled its close crop of intermingled leaves and buds, heralding the month whose name it bore. Not that it is by any means a rule for the May to blossom in its own month—rather the reverse; but this spring-time Harry Neville was enjoying had been an unusually genial one.

Was he enjoying it, though? He ought to have been, no doubt; but, alas! of all the many sins of omission daily, hourly committed, and little thought of, where is one more universal than negligence of, nay, even discontent with, the blessings, great and small, that, because they are habitual ones, cease to be recognised as such.

Young Neville was in the full pride and strength of youth—he had health, wealth, station, kindred, friends; he was riding his own favourite blood mare, on a beautiful spring evening, with no legitimate care or sorrow. Every sound and sight of nature—the budding trees, the sky-larks warbling their sweet evening chorus high up in the heavens, at the utmost tension of their tiny throats; the fresh pleasant smell of the newly-turned earth in a neighbouring field; the dainty primroses, showing their delicate blossoms from amid their half-folded, pale green leaves; the faint scent of the violets from the south bank of the hedge-row; the young fresh springing grass in the turf beneath his horse's feet; the balmy breeze, fresh, but not too cool; the ex-

hilarating song of the thrush, so loud, yet so sweet and harmonious, demanding your sympathy in all the causes of its joyous exulting melody. All these, and a hundred other things, trivial matters, some may think, but at any rate pleasant and beautiful, and telling a glorious tale of the magnificent wonders of Creation, called on Harry Neville to rejoice in his young existence also—to think of the pleasant lines wherein his lot was cast, and to be happy and grateful. But no.

Harry was by no means indifferent to all or any of these things as a rule—perhaps appreciated them as much, or more than many of his fellows; but just now he gave no passing thought to them. He was discontented and provoked. He had set his heart on one special object—all the more as it seemed more difficult of attainment than might reasonably have been anticipated, and was in a frame of mind to be pleased with nothing that did not promise help directly, or indirectly, in that one pursuit.

Fellow human hearts, was Harry Neville the first so to do? Will he be the last?

"Good day, Mr. Hernshaw. A lucky meeting, and will save me a ride round that would hardly let me be in time for dinner at the Castle."

"Good evening, sir, and a beautiful one it is," and Reuben reined in the sturdy cob he was bestriding, and waited the young man's pleasure, as they stood together in the cross lane in which they had suddenly encountered each other. "Were you wanting me, did you say, Mr. Neville?" added the honest farmer, doubtfully, for though knowing the whole Castle family perfectly well by sight and history, so to speak, from the Earl himself down to the last lad taken for help into the stables, Reuben Hernshaw had never had any personal dealings with one of them, held no land, had bought no horse from them, and, except a passing greeting now and then in the town, or when he indulged himself as a rare treat to a day's following the hounds, had rarely exchanged a word with them.

"Yes, that I am, Mr. Hernshaw; and I want more than that, I want the use of a pony of yours."

"Indeed, sir," and Reuben smiled as if both proud and pleased; he liked the Earl's young son to ask him a favour, and he dearly loved bestowing one of any sort on any human being. "I should hardly have thought *you* would have had any need to come to my stables for a nag; but you're heartily welcome, I'm sure, and right pleased am I to have one you fancy."

"Thank you, Mr. Hernshaw. I felt sure you'd not say me nay, especially as it's for a lady's use I borrow it."

"Indeed, sir! And what horse may it be, then? I don't think the grey would carry a lady, not without training—Black Bess might, perhaps, but she's a temper of her own, so the lady must have a good seat and a light hand, and be no coward neither."

"She's not that, at all events," responded Harry Neville, smiling. "But it's not either a grey or a black I want, Mr. Hernshaw, but a bay—an old bay mare—that has been a capital one in her time. Her best days are over now, but she has a good eye, and a gentle temper, I'm sure, and so is just the thing for

me, if you'll be good enough to lend her."

"A bay, sir? I didn't know I had such a——"

"It's up at the Manor House," interrupted young Neville, hastily; and then, as the thought of his promise to the bailiff flashed across him, he added, colouring crimson, "Mr. Tuffnell has charge of it for you, I believe, and it's the only thing I can see at all fit for Miss Lockstone to begin riding on."

A great and marked change came over Reuben Hernshaw's look and manner. He drew himself up stiffly, and said respectfully, but with unmistakable firmness,

"I'm sorry to go from my word, Mr. Neville, but I can't lend 'Lady.' I rather wonder Mr. Tuffnell should have thought fit to show her to you even, sir, meaning no offence to you."

"He didn't; I found her out in hunting up all the horses about the place. But what is there so wonderful about 'Lady,' that you go from your word, Mr. Hernshaw?" and Harry Neville spoke haughtily and quickly, showing himself displeased, as he was.

"Not just that either, Mr. Neville. I said you were heartily welcome to one of my horses, but I didn't say to any. Not but what *you* would have been, to the best of them," he corrected, truthfully, "even 'Lady,' though I'd not a thought it was her you meant, and I shouldn't have liked lending her, but for a Lockstone—no, sir. I'm sorry to disappoint you, and for your own use you might have been welcome, but not a horse of mine shall they ever use, with my free will."

"Why, he's your landlord!" cried Harry, surprise a little colouring the disappointment in his tone.

"Not with my free will either, though, sir; and I'd take a farm under another to-morrow, if I could. I held under the Lees," and he pronounced the words with a sort of defiant reverence in his tone.

"Well, but if they lose the place, and Mr. Lockstone gets it, he can't help that, can he?"

"I can't say, sir," and Reuben uttered the few words with dry emphasis.

Harry laughed.

"You think he could, seemingly, and I believe you're not the only one. However, that's no affair of mine or yours, that I can see. I understand it is his now, beyond all power of dispute."

"You'll excuse me, sir," and Reuben spoke sturdily, almost fiercely, "and I mean no offence, but I'll never believe Stephen Lockstone's got the Lees' property fairly, and—I can't help saying it, sir—I do wonder a Neville upholds him in it. It's not that way a Lee would treat a stranger that had turned out Lord Avonsdale, I expect!" and Hernshaw, with a low bow, was riding off, when young Neville spurred his horse to his side, and laying his hand on the frieze-coated arm of the farmer, said, in a voice which must have disarmed a harder-natured man than good Reuben,

"Hernshaw, you're an honest, true-hearted fellow, and I like you all the better for your staunch love for the old people. What a splendid fellow you'd have made three hundred years back! But, now look you, I'm asking nothing for the lawyer himself! I know little

of him, and care less, and if he's come into the Manor wrongfully, why, I hope he'll be kicked out, that's all; but his daughter, Miss Lockstone, you know nothing against her?" and, in spite of himself, there was a trembling eagerness in the young man's tones as he spoke the last few words, that made the other turn and look at him curiously.

"No," he returned, after a pause, speaking slowly and reflectively—"no, I never heard a word against her, except that she keeps herself too proud for a born lady, though I know nothing of that myself; but she's her father's daughter, Mr. Neville," and he spoke deprecatingly, as if warning Harry against himself, as it were.

"To be sure she is—but it's no fault of hers, poor girl; and if he's a bad man, why, you'd be the first to pity her, Mr. Hernshaw—I know you would."

Reuben smiled a little grimly.

"I can't lend the horse for all that, Mr. Neville, and it's that you want, I know—I couldn't lend a horse of mine to one of her name—I *couldn't*, and there's all about it,

sir; and as for Lady, why, I'd rather shoot her with my own hand first."

"And why? What is there so particular about this Lady?" asked Harry, once more, really curious why an old bay pony should be made so great a fuss and mystery over.

"Miss Mabel and the young master, sir—they both took to Lady after they'd given over Tawney. Poor Tawney! he's dead and buried under the old ash at the home farm; but Lady, she was sold with all the rest of the poor dumb things, that couldn't speak a word or help themselves," added the farmer, pityingly, as though he considered it must have added seriously to the horses' and cows' pain at being sent from the Manor, not to have the power of audibly remonstrating against the unjust proceedings occasioning it. "And so I bought her, sir, for the sake of Miss Mabel and old times; and after being the pet of the Lees, and carrying them so long, do you think she should ever have a Lockstone on her back? Not with my consent, as long as I live, Mr. Neville, let who will ask," and the farmer resolutely drew him-

self up in his saddle, and pressed his lips firmly together, as if resolved no sort of consent should be unwittingly obtained from him to such desecration.

Harry comprehended in an instant the feelings at work, and woefully disappointed as he felt, respected and acquiesced in them.

"*I* won't ask you again, Mr. Hernshaw, and altogether withdraw my request, now I see how the thing stands, and your views upon it. But I do want to get a horse for this young lady to ride, and how to manage it I don't know."

"Why, surely, sir, Castle Neville's stables must be a good bit changed if you can't find one there!" exclaimed Reuben, in surprise.

"Oh! there are half a dozen, but she won't have one of them. I must get a horse of her own, or borrow one from some one on the estate."

"Well, I'm not sorry to hear that, now, because it shows she's not like her father altogether, in liking other men's shoes better than her own," returned the good farmer, approvingly.

"But it doesn't help me out of my difficulty—how to get a horse she can ride to-morrow morning," said Neville, despairingly.

"Why, hasn't Tuffnell one among the turned outs, sir? I'm sure he must; or one of the colts would be sure to do after a bit."

"Yes; but not at once. However, I'll talk to Tuffnell again about it. I didn't see all the resources, apparently; and now good evening, Mr. Hernshaw, I must make the best of my way home."

"Good evening to you, sir, and a pleasant ride," and Reuben raised his hat as the young man rode off, and watched him disappear quite down the lane, groom and all, before he himself resumed his shog trot homewards.

"Who'd think of one of the Nevilles taking up with such a scurvy lot as those?" he thought to himself as he went along; "I'd a better opinion of them altogether, that I had. And after all, the young chap looks honest, and, as he says, the girl can't help her father's dirty ways; but if it was me, I'd rather steer clear of the whole pack of them, for my part. I wouldn't take a graft, was it ever so healthy

itself, from a bad stock. No, that I wouldn't. Steve Lockstone, too, the Merestown attorney, and my Lord Avonsdale's son. It doesn't seem right somehow."

And so impressed was he with its incongruity, that he took the first opportunity of repeating his sentiments to his wife after he got home. Mrs. Hernshaw partly agreed in them, but shrewdly observed,

"Gold goes a great way with some folk, Reuben, and I've heard say it's the same whether people are very grand or no; and likely enough Mr. Neville thinks this Miss Lockstone will come into the property by-and-by."

"You speak just as though 'twas hers to come into, Mary," returned her husband, angrily; "I can't and I won't think wickedness will prosper like that, and the Lees never come into their own again."

"I'm sure I hope they will," answered Mrs. Hernshaw, meekly; "if wishing would do it, they'd be there fast enough, if there was only you and me to keep at it, Reuben. I only meant Mr. Neville might think more of the

place than he does of the people like."

"More fool he, then; but I can't quite think that of him neither, he's made of honester stuff, all the Nevilles always was, and I'm sure I wish him a deal better luck than he seems trying to get for himself;" and so saying, Reuben took up his hat and went out to have a look at his stock before they were locked up for the night.

Meanwhile, the subject of his thoughts was hurrying home at a hand gallop, with very different ideas in his head, or, rather, something of the same ideas, but with a wonderfully opposite colouring. He was thinking over all the farmer had said—what an honest prejudiced fellow he was—how those sort of people could not bring themselves to look kindly on any changes in a hurry. And the bay pony, too—fancy his buying that, though evidently not in the least wanting such a thing—finding it rather in the way. It was a kindness, a delicate proof of his true attachment to the old family, many a man of higher rank would have been wanting in. Well, he certainly should not like the idea of

his and Charley's old horse falling into any upstart's hands at the Castle. The Castle!—and he almost laughed at the bare possibility of that's ever leaving their family! No, that was an utterly impossible catastrophe!

And just then he passed the gates of the old Manor, and the thought flashed across him that the Lees had been county people almost as long—had he not heard longer than they?—as the Avonsdales themselves; and that had been an entailed estate, too. Well, it was a terrible thing for those poor Lees, no doubt, but he supposed it was all right. Such things did happen, and without any blame to the agent either, when owners were spendthrifts, and their agents prudent and industrious. Still, it was not a pleasant picture, he allowed. Fancy old Pritchard, their family lawyer and agent, setting up at the Castle and they turned out! Could there be any truth in the reports current among some of the people, that all was not as it should be? Pshaw!—why, the other side had employed another lawyer, he had heard, and could make nothing of it. Besides, in any case,

Sarah was innocent of all share in the business, all blame. Girls couldn't help what their fathers did; and very, very fortunate it was for many a girl besides her, that the father's sins, unless very outrageous as to the law of the land, were not visited—by society, at any rate—on the children.

And then he began to think of Sarah. How very wonderfully handsome she was! How magnificent she had looked that morning! How happy he had been talking to her—at least, he should have been, if she would have been just a little bit kinder. She would in time, he hoped. Perhaps the reports about her father—if she knew them—made her so cold, and hard, and ironical. How different she was from others! Well, he was glad of that. He would not have her otherwise, for therein lay her great charm. At least, he thought so. How glad he was, too, he had thought of the riding; and then he began speculating on his chances of finding a horse for her, and went wandering on from one point in the future to another, till he totally forgot all present things, and was nearly

unseated by his horse pulling up with a sudden jerk at the gates of Castle Neville, which he had been quietly about to pass.

Sarah Lockstone walked up and down the breakfast-room of the Manor on the morning after young Neville's visit, with a quick step and knitted brow. She had been having rather a sharp passage of arms with her father, who had just driven off, vanquished, of course, to the old house in the High Street. Now she was thinking of some other matters, and presently the thought of Harry Neville and the riding-lessons flashed across her mind. The old smile stole over her face, and she sauntered into the conservatory, and plucked a sprig or two from the sweetest-smelling flowers there.

She inhaled their fragrance as she slowly retraced her steps, and then took up her position in one of the recessed windows.

"Well, it will just suit me. I have not half enough to fill my time with just now. Besides, riding in will be much quicker and better than walking. Yes, it is a good move, and *your own*, Harry Neville," and as she

spoke, she plucked the fresh petals from the beautiful blossoms in her hand, and ruthlessly flung them on the gravel below the window she had opened.

Young Neville was half an hour beyond the appointed time when he alighted breathless in front of the Manor. Before the servant had answered his impetuous summons at the bell, he saw the lady of whom his thoughts were so full slowly turning the corner of the house, and flew to meet her.

"I was afraid you would not wait for me," he exclaimed, as he took the hand she neither proffered nor withheld. "I am so late, but it was no fault of mine. My father had some unexpected business to attend to, in which he wanted my help. Such a thing hardly occurs once in a year, and it was most provoking that this should be of all days the one. You forgive me?"

"Nay, I have nothing to forgive, it was your own pleasure to make the appointment. Your own pleasure—well, misfortune, if you like it better—that it is broken. The only thing is, this marvellous lesson must be curtailed."

"I have more to plead forgiveness for than my tardy appearance. I galloped the whole way here, and came as much of a steeple-chase as consideration for Rodolf would allow. I brought a quiet horse on purpose; and my groom is I don't know where—he will appear some time, I suppose."

Sarah laughed.

"Did you leave him in a ditch?"

"Not exactly, but I fancy he or his horse preferred the high road. The last time I saw them, they were wandering up and down Forde's dyke, not approving the point whence I took it. But to my confession—I have no horse for you. I went all over the stables and could find none in any way suitable. I tried to borrow one from your tenants, and failed in all. I longed to bring one from the Castle, but I was afraid of your displeasure."

"It would have been useless had you done so, I should not have used it."

"And very, very unwise, and, may I say, obstinate of you not to do so," Harry returned, hotly; but Sarah only smiled. His frank plain-speaking and polished ease of manner

were novelties to her, as specially addressed to herself, and she did not dislike either. "And now, my confession made, I have a request to prefer," he continued. "I find my best chance of an animal that will do, and is yet neither begged, borrowed, nor stolen, is from the resources of your home farm. Will you come there with me and help me to choose?"

"With all my heart. It is an idle time with me—as well filled up that way as any other. But first you shall come with me and see my morning's work."

CHAPTER VII.

FRANK MARSDEN hurried down the path to help the old man out, as Dr. Armsdaile's carriage drove up just as the dusk began to give tokens of its approach.

"So, young man, you are here still!" exclaimed the doctor, who was, of course, the first to alight, and was already within the gate as Frank ran out. "The papers must have taken a considerable time, I should say; I can only hope your researches have been satisfactory!"

"Not at all, sir, and I shall have to go to town at once, and I stopped to tell Mr. Lee so—but hush! Let me go and help him out of the carriage," and the young man pressed forward as old Mr. Lee, becoming impatient, put one leg out of the carriage. "Have a care, sir. Take my arm," he exclaimed,

eagerly, and helping him tenderly out, he escorted him up the path.

Mabel stood at the steps to receive them.

"Well, dear papa, have you had a pleasant day?" she asked, as she put her hand into his other arm, and aided him up the ascent.

"Very pleasant, very pleasant, indeed, my dear! But we'll have the open carriage next time, my dear. I don't like the brougham," and as poor Mabel ventured some reconciling remark, with a beseeching glance at Dr. Armsdaile, who, with her mother, was close behind, he went on, "No, Mabel, my dear, it's no use your saying not. There's not enough room; Dr. Armsdaile and your mother, too, were quite squeezed, Mabel, so we'll have the open carriage to-morrow, mind."

By this time they had got into the house, and the old man sank down in his great chair, and glanced suspiciously about the room, as was his wont. For a minute or two he did not speak, and Mabel, who had been in mortal terror lest he should, through some inadvertence on their part, discover that the precious cabinet had been touched, trembled

at what his next words might be; and it was a great, intense relief when he said, with a satisfied voice,

"Ah! there is tea all ready, that's right. I like that; they forget very often, but now it's all right, and you'll mind about the open carriage to-morrow, Mabel. Dr. Armsdaile, you'll have some tea with us—do?" and he spoke just in the old fashion, the courteous, half condescending tones, so sad to hear from his lips now.

The doctor refused, having still a round before him; but Frank Marsden, to whom the same hospitality was extended, readily accepted, and they were soon seated round the little table, which Frank, for one, was beginning to think the most comfortable he had ever seen; assuredly it had afforded the most enjoyable meals of his life to him, frugal and simple as they were. He began to tell Mrs. Lee of a necessity for his instant departure to town.

"I believe I shall begin my journey to-morrow," he concluded. "When a thing must be done, it had better be done at once."

"But you are returning?" asked Mrs. Lee, who, innocent of all the attempts on the cabinet, was a little surprised and puzzled by a certain excitement and agitation visible in the young man's manner to-night, and never seen by her before.

"Certainly, Mrs. Lee, and, as I trust, before very long; but it is a resolve not two hours old, and so I'm not quite accustomed to it myself yet, you see, though the only wonder is I have not had occasion to run up to town before this," and he glanced at Mabel as he spoke. It was not necessary to raise hopes in Mrs. Lee's mind which might prove utterly fallacious.

As yet she knew nothing of their suspicions and speculations, and at Mabel's instance it had been agreed that she should be left in her happy ignorance, till some necessity might arise for enlightening her.

"We shall miss you very much, Mr. Marsden," she said, in her peculiarly gentle tones, "and shall be very glad to see you back again."

"Not more so than I shall be to come," Frank answered, earnestly, "though the time

must soon come when I shall leave with no definite hope of return," and there was a cadence of unmistakable sadness in his voice.

Mrs. Lee, too, sighed, but she was not thinking at the moment of Frank Marsden's final farewell, but of the uselessness of his coming, the questionable good it had been as regarded her husband. She glanced towards the latter now, and said plaintively,

"Mr. Lee will not understand your being away at all, I am afraid. He will find quite a blank, after looking to your visits so much. You must come and see us, if you will, Mr. Marsden, after all this sad, hopeless business is over. We have not much inducement to offer you, but a sincere welcome. That will always be yours."

"Thank you a thousand times," cried Frank, warm gratitude in his look and voice. "I ask no better, and if you will allow me to come sometimes, it will make me very happy."

Mrs. Lee smiled.

"It is doing double good, at very little cost, then, I am sure, as we shall be your debtors for most of our enlivening variety.

Your visits will be the events of our lives. Remember and make them as often as you can."

"You do not know what dangerous advantage I am likely to take of your words, my dear madam, or you would not venture them," said Frank, cheerfully. "But for the calls of my profession, which I am afraid will interfere very much oftener than I could wish in the matter, I should soon become a perfect pest to you, depend upon it."

"Try," returned Mrs. Lee; and Mabel, looking up from her teapot, which had been giving her an unusual amount of occupation during the past conversation, said saucily,

"Mr. Marsden is angling for return compliments, I do believe, mamma, and he shall not hook one stray little fish," and she stole a shy glance at him from under her long silken lashes.

"I have landed the one big one I really cared for," Frank answered, as he looked earnestly at her, "without trying for it, too, at the moment, so I am perfectly content—for the present," he added, with a slight emphasis; and turning to the old man, who had been

making a very satisfactory meal after his long day in the open air, he tried to make him, too, understand his proposed departure.

This was not very easy; and, indeed, it was quite evident he never absolutely realized the fact, notwithstanding his repeated answers of, "Going to London? Yes, I used to like London very much once—I never go now!" since, when the time came next morning for Frank's usual visit, he kept inquiring for him, and querulously repeating his wonder at what had detained him, and where he could be, in spite of Mabel's incessantly recalling to his mind that he had told him he was going to town. He would accept her answer at the moment, and rest quiet for awhile, then in five minutes would come again,

"Mabel, Mabel, my darling, why doesn't Mr. Marsden come? I want to see him. I have to talk to him, you know. Can't you send for him, Mabel?"

"He cannot come to-day, papa, dear. He is in London; don't you remember he told us he was going last night? He cannot come to us again yet," and Mabel sighed wearily. It

was indeed a hopeless prospect for the time when he would be really gone, and the time for seeing him again would certainly be more distant, and probably more uncertain.

One evening, as the bare shadows of the little square houses in Newman's Buildings were lengthening every instant, as it seemed, and a dusky haze in the air told of fast approaching twilight, Deborah was hurrying home as fast as she possibly could, laden with a great basket of necessaries, which she had been into the town to buy. She was much later than she had intended, and began to fear she should hardly be in time to get the evening meal comfortably ready before the party—who had again gone out with the good doctor, and this time Mabel with them—should return from their country expedition.

Deborah trotted along firmly and fast; but she had had a hard day's work, and the basket was heavy; and as she came in sight of home, she was fain to set it down and rest awhile, in the hope of getting on all the quicker by-and-bye. She had hardly put it down, however, when a strange and not very pleasant voice

asked in an accent intended to be irresistibly insinuating,

"Shall I carry it for you, Mrs. Deborah? I'm sure I shall do you so much service with great pleasure."

Deborah started, and turned to confront the new neighbour she held in such exceeding detestation and abhorence—Tony Hicks—though she was still ignorant that such was his patronymic. She drew herself stiffly up, and snatching her basket, replied with the expression of a she bear expecting the prey for her young ones to be taken from her,

"I'm not in the habit of trusting things I've the charge of to strangers, thank you." And the last words came out very unwillingly, and much more in the tone of an injunction to "mind his own business" than of gratitude.

"As you please, ma'am; but next-door neighbours aren't exactly strangers, *I* should say, and should be willing to do little friendly acts for each other—to my thinking, that is—but you hold a different opinion, apparently. Well, I'm sorry for it, I'm sure; I wished to be civil," and he persisted in walking on by

her side, to poor Deborah's intense annoyance and discomfort. She vouchsafed no answer to this last speech, but increased her speed to almost a run, so that she arrived well-nigh breathless at the gate of No. 5. But Tony Hicks was there before her—standing just in front of it, too, his hand upon the latch, so as completely to impede her farther progress, while he resumed, "No offence, Mrs. Deborah, I hope—I'm very sure none was meant. You were going home loaded—I empty handed—so why shouldn't I have carried your basket? That's all about it, you see; and I should have been proud to have served you, I'm sure. I don't live with my eyes shut, and you've four women's work to do—and do it, too, that's more, as I can witness; and I'm sure I should be very pleased to be neighbourly," and Tony looked cunningly up from under his bushy eyebrows, to see how kindly his flattery was taken.

Deborah resented it. All the more as it seemed to cast an indirect reflection on the poverty of their establishment, and she answered sharply,

"If you'd let me get into my own gate without more ado, I should say it would be a deal more to the purpose of neighbourliness than talking all that trash."

She tried to push her way forward.

"Stop a bit, stop a bit, Mrs. Deborah; I'll open it for you, anyhow," and he fumbled so long at the latch, Deborah longed heartily to give him a warm box on his ear. "There now," as the gate flew open at last; "but just say there's no offence—do now." And making an elaborate bow, he allowed her to pass, accepting her indignant grunt apparently as an assurance of friendliness. Deborah hurried up the steps, and into her own territory, relieving her indignant and outraged feelings by shutting the door, once safe on the other side, with a loud and resounding bang. Tony heard it, as he still lingered by the gate, and chuckled at the sound. "Ah! bang away, old lady; but you're done, for all that."

And he turned into his own gate, with a well-satisfied smile on his revolting face.

In less than a week Frank Marsden once more appeared in Newman's Buildings, and

received as warm a welcome from each individual there as he could expect, and almost as warm a one as he desired, which is saying a good deal. It was evening when he arrived, and he had no chance of any conversation with Mabel alone till Deborah came in with the old man's supper. Then, under pretence of helping Mabel to put away a book they had been looking at, he followed her to the extreme end of the little room, and she whispered eagerly,

"Have you found it out?"

"Yes, and, like many another thing, its simplicity once known is provoking. I can look to-morrow morning—yes, quite safely—before he is down. There will be no risk, I promise you."

And with an assuring smile he returned to Mr. Lee, who had at the moment claimed his attention for something in a paper Frank had brought him, that had just attracted his notice.

What Frank had discovered was the mystery of how to open the secret hiding-place of the cabinet. The plan he had hastily

sketched of it, he had gone to town with, for the express purpose of submitting it to a man expert in all such matters. The man had recognized the peculiarity of its mechanism at once, and explained its secret spring to Frank so clearly, that the latter felt certain he could not fail to open it now, and returned eager and impatient to try.

He was in the house again the next morning before Mrs. Lee had gone to her husband, and had some difficulty in successfully concealing the irritability and impatience her continued presence caused him, till she was fairly out of the room and on her way upstairs.

"Safe at last!" he exclaimed, in a tone of intense relief, as he carefully re-shut the door, after convincing himself she was really gone.

"Poor mamma!" smiled Mabel; "I saw how happy you were in the delay—but you came just an hour too soon."

"Never mind. You are as impatient as I in your heart, or ought to be, at any rate. Now—now or never," and he hurriedly pulled away some half dozen drawers; then shouting "Come and see, Miss Lee!" he waited only

till she was at his side before he placed one hand on the top of the cabinet, in the very centre of an hexagonally-cut piece of inlaid wood, and the other on the angle of the exposed interior square. In a moment one side of the wood, the narrowest and smallest, slipped an atom on one side; he eagerly pushed it, till it had slid completely back, and disclosed a small square cavity, within about some four inches square—no more.

Into this Mabel and Frank breathlessly, eagerly peered. Yes, there was no doubt about it—there lay a bit of paper—skin, rather, for it was parchment—neatly folded into a very compact compass, and fitting exactly to its hiding-place.

Both gazed on it in silence for a few seconds, then each drew a long breath—a sigh of relief from an almost painful tension of excited feeling. Frank turned and looked at Mabel, and Mabel looked at Frank. There it lay, that inanimate, unconscious object of so much anxiety, fear, doubt, speculation, and, after all, *what* was it?

That was now the question, and easily as it

could now be answered, each seemed to fear, to shrink, from setting the matter finally at rest.

At last Mabel murmured in a low, half awe-struck whisper, "You were right."

"Yes, it is there; but, oh! if it is too late," and gaining fresh energy from the thought, Frank resolutely took hold of the paper and pulled it forth.

Only one piece, but tightly folded into innumerable bends and creases. Carefully did he begin to open it—slowly at first, then more rapidly, till at length the last fold was almost torn open, and with an interjection of dismay, Frank let the paper fall at his feet, while he turned with a blank white face to Mabel.

"What is it?" she cried, trembling and frightened.

"Look," he answered, in a hoarse whisper, pointing to the sheet where it lay, and utterly incapable at the moment of picking it up.

Mabel hurriedly did so, and spread it ou anxiously before her. It was nothing, nothing but a blank piece of parchment, thus elaborately folded, except that in the very centre

were written, in delicately formed letters, with very artistic flourishes, but in an evidently feigned hand, the very words Frank had made use of not two minutes ago,

"Too late!"

This, then, was the end of all. The object of all their speculation, conjectures, debates, suspicions, of all Frank's exertions and experiments, of Mabel's patient help and quiet waiting, was attained at last, and the result was bitter disappointment—worse, as Frank felt, when he could again feel anything beyond the first shock of surprise, and when his reason began to act once more, and his thoughts to busy themselves. What first roused him from his mental stupor was Mabel's whispered terrified question,

"What does it mean?"

"I wish I knew," Frank answered, almost savagely, as he all but snatched the paper from her hands and studied it again intently.

"Has it any meaning, do you think?" she again timidly asked.

"I am afraid it has."

"Why was it put there?"

"To mock us, I suppose."

"But by whom?"

"I would give all—much that I have—to know," he answered.

"My father," Mabel hesitated, "he could not—it was not such a thing as this he meant.'

"Good heavens! no—a thousand times no! But it only proves to me more certainly than ever that he knew what he was doing in his care of this cabinet, and in all he said about it. Oh! Mabel," and Frank forgot all forms in his eagerness, "this is terrible; it is worse than if we had found nothing—proved nothing had been there," and he leant over the unfortunate cabinet and covered his face with his hands.

Poor fellow! He was not at that moment merely the lawyer disappointed of some telling incident he had expected for his client's case. He was the warm friend, personally interested in the cause, and deeply chagrined at the bare idea that any delay or negligence on his part might have injured it.

Mabel longed to comfort him, and forgot her own sorrow in the desire to alleviate his.

"You could not help it," she said gently; "you did all you could—more than most would have dreamed of attempting."

He looked up with a wan smile.

"And a complete failure I have made of it. No, I cannot forgive myself—I should have risked all, everything but delay."

"Why," cried Mabel in utter bewilderment, "you do not think—you cannot imagine this has been done lately?"

"No, I am *sure* of it," he replied emphatically. "It has been done since last Thursday—since you and I first ascertained surely that there was a secret hiding-place in here."

"Impossible!" cried Mabel, paling in her turn.

"I should have said so a week ago, but it has been done. Do you remember that scoffing laugh which startled us so suddenly then? Well, the laugher was wiser than I, found out—had then perhaps discovered the secret spring, and this is the result."

Mabel shuddered, and involuntarily drew a little nearer her companion, as she glanced round the room.

"Oh! that is terrible to think of," she murmured.

"It has been done. Look!" and he once more picked up the parchment; "these folds are fresh, so is the ink; this document has not been there many days."

"But who?" began Mabel; "Deborah is as one of ourselves!"

"Quite so; I was never thinking of her. It is some one outside the house that has accomplished this."

"Stephen Lockstone?" asked Mabel hardly above her breath, and looking very terrified as she spoke.

"He or one in his interest, I should say—there is little doubt of that; how and when is the question," and he too looked round the room as Mabel had done before.

"It is impossible," repeated the latter again; "how could any one get at it?"

"I wish I could tell," and Frank groaned in his helplessness. "You are never out of the house, all of you, and there is but this one room! It is most mysterious and unaccountable! If it had been at the Manor,

now—a large rambling house, with numbers of people in and out! One might have believed, if it had no other advantage, so small a house was safe from such a thing as this. What are you thinking of?" he added hastily, as he saw a change pass over Mabel's face.

"I was thinking—but it is impossible. You will laugh at such an idea, and yet it is very strange!"

"What? only tell me; I shall think nothing impossible henceforth," said poor Frank wearily.

"Only two days ago—we were all out, for the first time, I do believe, since we have been here; papa had been missing you so very much, we were so glad of the opportunity of change and interest for him—so we all went and stopped the whole day with Mr. Ravenshaw. It was nearly dusk when we got home, but papa had hardly settled down in his chair when he frightened us all by starting up, quite briskly as he used to do, and almost running to the cabinet, declaring, vowing somebody had been touching it."

"Well?" said Frank, as Mabel stopped in her narration.

"When he got to it he did not begin patting it as usual, but stooped down and took out one or two drawers, and kept talking to himself about its being touched. I thought he changed them, but I was not thinking about the cabinet at all at the time, and did not attend to what he was doing particularly; I was only vexing at his disturbing himself again."

"And you noticed nothing at all in its appearance?"

"Nothing whatever, nor did mamma, and she did look at it, she told me, as we came in; she has a habit of doing so from a nervous anxiety lest papa should see anything wrong about it. We have had so much trouble in calming him so many times, when he has thought it had been interfered with, you know. That night we could not get him composed at all. He walked up and down the room even, he was so excited, and would not touch his supper, and we had the greatest difficulty in persuading him to go to bed, long

after his usual time. Nothing would pacify or comfort him."

"An intuitive knowledge of what had befallen, one would be tempted to say," said Frank mournfully.

"Do you think it could have been touched, then?"

"Probably—certainly, if that was the only day you were out. What other chance could there have been? But did not Deborah know anything of it?—had anyone been to the house?"

"No; that was one of the strangest parts of it. Deborah said she had been so busy downstairs she had not touched the parlour since we had left—hardly been into it, and that no soul had been to the house all day. In the afternoon she went out to get some things we wanted in the town, but she was a very little time gone, and locked the house as usual."

"Taking the key with her?"

"Oh! yes, not a doubt of it, because I remember a long story she told me once about the necessity of it, before I had learnt any-

thing of this sort of life," Mabel answered with naïve simplicity.

"She saw no signs of the house being invaded while she was gone?"

"I should think not, as she said how impossible it was the cabinet could have been touched."

"I will ask her about it myself presently; but no doubt this was done then—I feel sure of it," and Frank sadly replaced the cabinet drawers.

CHAPTER VIII.

SARAH LOCKSTONE led Harry Neville away round the sweep to the old rhododendron again, the scene of Charon's lessons; and there sat the old dog, motionless as a statue, and as Sarah passed nothing but a quick movement of his bright eyes showed his recognition of her presence.

"Accomplished, you see," she said, turning full round on the young man, and pointing to the dog, while her bright eyes shone with triumph and defiance.

"At what cost?" asked Harry, looking, as he felt, provoked, yet full of admiration.

"To me, or—to the dog?"

And she glanced scornfully up at him.

"I was thinking of Charon then," Harry answered boldly, "but now I say to both."

"Not so many strappings to him as you

might expect. Charon is not so great a fool as many a human being priding himself on his humanity. He knows he *must* learn what I desire to teach, and is willing to dispense with as many lessons as may be."

"And to yourself?" asked Harry, as she paused.

"To me? Oh! a pair of gloves."

And she held out her hands to show the splits and stains upon their coverings.

"Is that all?"

"What would you have? The half hour it took would have been wasted any way, since I was waiting for you. This saved its total loss, and inspirited me. You see, my will is not to be trifled with, Mr. Neville."

And she looked curiously at him.

"No, it would be but a weak one if that were so. But it can be influenced."

And Harry spoke the last words softly, half as a question, half as a doubt.

"I would not advise anyone to believe that, but I will neither deny nor acquiesce in it. Charon, you may come."

And as the dog bounded forward in exuber-

ant glee at his release, she laid her hand caressingly on his head.

"He bears you no malice, at any rate," observed young Neville.

She laughed scornfully.

"How often am I to remind you he is a brute, not a man? Why, then, should he resent instructions that may prove useful to him, discipline that enhances his merit and his worth? No; he leaves that to his superiors—his masters."

"You are in a caustic mood to-day. Why say such bitter things of our—your own nature?"

"I only say what is true. *I* do not make it bitter; if you dislike facts you will soon tire of my company," she added, carelessly throwing a little whip she carried in her hand up in the air and catching it again.

"Allow me to try a little longer, at any rate," Harry said, smiling; "I have no weariness as yet."

"I shall have very soon, if you delay much longer about this horse—shall we go and see it now?"

The young man eagerly assented, and they at once walked to the home farm, very much astounding Mr. Tuffnell by their appearance there. He was coming out of the farm-yard as they reached the gate.

"Good morning, Mr. Tuffnell," Harry instantly shouted; "Miss Lockstone has come herself to look at the horses this time—have you any turned out that will do for her, do you think?"

The bailiff bowed low to the Earl's son, and a shade lower to his master's daughter, as he answered,

"I am afraid not, sir, but you had better come and see."

And he led the way into one of the meadows at the back of his own house, where four or five horses were at large, disporting themselves to their heart's content in their welcome freedom.

"Have any of them ever carried a lady?" Harry asked, gazing on the creatures with the eye of a critic.

"Only one, sir, and I doubt her answering your purpose. She is a spirited creature, and

has only been ridden by first-rate horsewomen."

He spoke the last words rather low, but Sarah heard them, and smiling scornfully, said,

"Which I am not, Mr. Tuffnell. You need not fear speaking out. I know my own powers as to what I can *not* as well as what I can do."

Harry meanwhile was taking a close look at each horse in succession. There was a large dark bay, well built and accurately proportioned, but too high and too large to make a graceful riding-horse. A rough black came next in order, with shaggy hocks, long mane and tail, and very wicked eyes. Harry passed both these over with a glance. The next, a dappled grey, arrested his attention longer. It was a neat little horse, of some thirteen hands, with good action, and mild expression in its large eyes.

"How about that?" he asked; "does he carry well?"

"Capitally as to strength and enduring, sir, but his paces are not so easy as they look, and he never had a lady on his back."

"A petticoat and I could soon do away that

objection," returned Harry, laughing; "I rather fancy him."

"I don't," observed Sarah curtly.

"He looks so good-tempered and gentle."

"And is all that, sir. He hasn't a bit of vice or devilry—begging your pardon, ma'am—in all his nature. A child might ride him."

"And as I am no child I should prefer not to ride him," Sarah said in the same tone.

Harry said no more, but directed his attention to the fourth horse of the group, a glossy chestnut with pretty head and flowing mane and tail, but there was an uncertain look in the corner of her eyes, and an impatient toss of her head, which, with ears continually put back, did not please him.

One only remained, another black, but perfectly different from the first, long and graceful in body, an arched neck, small ears, open delicate nostril, and a coat glossy as satin itself, but with an eye whose expression there was no mistaking. Not absolutely vicious, perhaps, but bespeaking a thorough knowledge of her own strength and ability, and a spirit

to resist all unwarrantable interference with her pleasure on any rider's part.

Harry was still looking doubtfully though admiringly at her, when Sarah, pointing her out, said quietly, "that is the one."

"Well, it's odd enough, Miss," said Tuffnell, "but you've hit on the very one that has carried a lady. She was Miss Mannering's horse before she married, you know, sir, and has carried her across country many a time."

"What! is it Jetty?" cried Harry with interest.

"Yes, sir. She was bought last Autumn, with another or two, an odd lot old Mr. Mannering turned out, before he moved house."

"I have chosen well, then?" queried Sarah, who had been looking from one to the other as they spoke.

"Chosen! you are not thinking of mounting her?" exclaimed Harry in extreme dismay.

"I thought I had pointed her out," she replied emphatically; "and for what other purpose could I do so?"

"Look at her! only look at her eye—what chance would a novice have on her back? She

is not easy to manage, even for a female Nimrod, such as Miss Mannering; what could you do with her?"

"I don't in the least know, but I mean to try."

"But not to begin with—not in the first instance?" Harry anxiously remonstrated.

"Yes, I do."

"Well, Miss," said Tuffnell slowly, as young Neville glanced appealingly towards him, "I shouldn't like to advise you or anybody to make your trial on Jetty."

"Then don't," was Sarah's provoking, almost contemptuous answer. "But in any case I intend riding her, if I ride at all."

"I could not answer to myself," cried Harry, despairingly, "to suffer you to peril your life in that way."

"My life is my own, not yours, Mr Neville, I take it," was the haughty answer, "so you can spare yourself the trouble of any debate upon the matter."

And in a lower tone she added, as she perceived his real consternation and distress, "It is useless—needless to argue the thing or to

oppose it. You have seen one instance of what my will can accomplish—you may see another. At any rate, I am resolved."

"Will you not think of your own safety, or let me think of it for you?" Harry asked sadly, humbly even.

A slight change passed over Sarah's cold, resolved face; for half an instant she seemed almost to waver. Then shaking off the passing feeling, whatever it might have been, she said contemptuously, as if angry with herself for even that moment's pause, "I cannot prevent your thoughts, Mr. Neville. Mine, like my acts, are under no one's control but my own."

Harry looked in her face for a moment, and then said, addressing Mr. Tuffnell, who stood twisting a straw in his fingers as he leant over the gate, curious as to the result of the conversation, but utterly indifferent,

"Will you have Jetty taken up, Mr. Tuffnell, if you please."

"At once, sir?"

"At once. Are her shoes off? I fancied not."

"Well, no, sir. I was not quite sure what would be done with her, and she has been stabled every night all through the winter."

"Will you mount this morning?" asked Harry, turning to Sarah as she stood watching him with a strange look on her face, "I will not say, will you have your first lesson? You have already discarded me, practically at any rate, as your Master."

She smiled, not ill-pleased, apparently. "Yes, I should like to try my powers at once. I have a strange longing to find myself on that creature's back," and she gazed on the mare with fized intentness. "But you may show me what I am to do when I get there, if you will."

Harry did not answer, and they both remained silently watching the feat of catching Jetty, which was by no means easy of accomplishment. The beautiful creature no sooner perceived, which she did in two minutes after the groom with his bridle and tray of oats had entered the field, that *she* was the object of his manœuvres, than she left off grazing and prepared herself for the battle, as

it were, arching her slender neck and distending her nostrils, shaking her silky mane and sniffing proudly in the air, as though disdaining all the crafty attempts of puny mortals to inveigle her into closer captivity against her will."

She allowed the man to approach within a yard, turned partly as if to meet him, then suddenly bounded high in the air, and with half a dozen strides placed herself securely at the opposite side of the meadow, and resumed her feeding, as though ignoring his proximity utterly.

Sarah smiled.

"She is an elegant creature."

"Yes, a perfect beauty in her way; but she, too, has a will of her own."

"All the better! I have no fancy for those gentle natures who are willing to obey the first one they encounter that does happen to have the power of judging for itself. I have no *fellow* feeling with it," she added, emphasising the latter words mockingly, "whether in man or in beast."

"No, that I can well believe," Harry

answered, quietly; "and opposites have no charm for you either, then?"

"Not in that way, certainly. Look at her now!"

And Jetty was worth looking at, as she stood pawing the ground and throwing her head in the air, but still resolutely blind, apparently, to the groom, now within a few feet of her. In another instant she had circled round him, and was galloping in easy strides round and round the field, displaying her beautiful action to the fullest advantage.

Harry, who dearly loved horses, and appreciated their every excellence, could not withhold an exclamation of admiration. Sarah sympathised fully in the feeling, and it pleased her.

"You don't despise such an exhibition of her will, at any rate," she observed, half tauntingly.

"No, she looks beautiful, and it is her instinct," added Harry, gravely.

Sarah laughed; something of the old laugh, too, there was in it, but tempered by a strange sort of restraint, arising, all but unwittingly

to herself, from her appreciation of the transparent honesty of the nature at her side.

"What if it be mine also?" she asked, curiously.

"Reason is yours also, to bring the other into order, as yonder man will Jetty sooner or later. She has half a mind to taste the oats now."

And so she had. She had stopped in full career, and danced half-way towards the groom, who stood shaking the oats insinuatingly in the sieve. But either she caught sight of the bridle in his hand, or remembered such indulgence in her epicurean tastes must be dearly bought, for she wheeled suddenly round, and took half a dozen more sweeps round the field. But by this time the shaggy black had come up and tasted the dainty feast; the grey, too, stood now rubbing her nose against the man's fustian jacket, now dipping it into the tempting heap of yellow grain slipping about in the sieve. Horse nature could stand it no longer, so Jetty gave a musical, prolonged neigh, and swooped down on the dainty with one bound, as it seemed. In another minute she was

caracoling along by Bob's side, the bridle safely noosed over her glossy, finely-shaped head. Harry followed man and horse to the stables, leaving Sarah where she was, leaning over the gate, and looking at the remaining horses without seeing them. Her thoughts were very busy, and she had little idea how much time had passed, when the sound of horses' feet approaching made her turn, and she beheld young Neville, a horse-cloth fastened about his legs, triumphantly bestriding Jetty on a side-saddle. A faint flush rose to her face as she muttered,

"How very absurd!"

"It's some time since Miss Mannering mounted her, so I thought I would remind her there was such a thing as obedience even when a petticoat sweeps her side," Harry said, as he trotted gently up. "She has a beautiful mouth, though, a cord of silk almost would guide her, in a skilful hand!"

"How is mine to become that?" demanded Sarah, and she walked up to the beautiful creature, as she stood impatiently arching her head and shaking the bridle, and patted her.

"Practice will be your best master in that," answered Harry. "But look here," and he proceeded to give her very accurate and minute instructions as to her seat, manner of handling the reins, &c., &c.

Sarah was no inapt scholar. She listened without interruption, grasped facts readily and clearly, comprehended accurately, and remembered exactly.

"And now," he asked, as the list of instructions drew to a close, "what are you to wear?"

"My habit, I suppose," she answered, quietly, and added, while watching his face, "I ordered one at Smithers's yesterday, and it came home this morning."

Harry's face betokened the wonder and surprise she had looked for; but he expressed neither, only saying,

"Will you put it on, then?"

She turned towards the house without another word, and young Neville, too, kept silence, as he walked the horse by her side. He was marvelling at the strange power of will she possessed, exercising it apparently over man and over creature as she pleased,

wondering, admiring, and never thinking of its effect upon himself, or the powerful glamour she had thrown round him, though, to do her justice, that had been done altogether unwittingly on her part, in the first instance, at any rate.

He employed the few minutes she took to equip in cantering Jetty up and down the park, and the beautiful mare made not the slightest objection to the proceeding. Harry was a perfect Centaur in his seat on horseback.

Sarah came down, arrayed in her new habit, and looking magnificent in all the radiance of her beauty, which was of a style that this costume displayed and set off to perfection. And strange as the garment was to her, she looked as much at ease and at home in it as though she had worn such all her life. Harry dismounted, and giving careful instructions to his groom how and where to hold Jetty, proceeded to enlighten his handsome pupil on the mysteries of mounting. She listened attentively, as before, and finally sprang into the saddle at the first trial, no affected bashfulness or coy shyness in the least

interfering with the performance, as might have been the case with ordinary girls. Of the two, Harry was the least self-possessed, as she placed her well-shaped foot in his hand, and he felt for an instant the light weight of her graceful figure.

Whatever else she might be, that Sarah Lockstone looked wonderfully beautiful on horseback, none who saw her at that moment could dispute. Face and figure showed to their full advantage; while the attention claimed by her novel employment was all-absorbing, and allowed but one expression, that of attentive interest, to rest on her mobile features.

Harry glanced at her surpassing beauty for an instant, before he arranged the reins in her hand. It was worth something thus to feast his eyes; while she was, for a marvel, unconscious of his gaze. When she felt herself in the entirely new position of being mounted on Jetty's back, when the horse quivered for a moment under her as she gave a slight shake after her gallop, when she looked far down, as it seemed, on the ground, while the mare's ears

were put slightly back, for an instant—only for an instant, but to Sarah Lockstone it was a strange and novel one—a peculiar sensation crept over her. It was not fear, it was not altogether curiosity, though a slight leaven of both might have been mixed with it, and the self-query passed through her mind,

"Shall I break my neck?"

It was suggested, and had passed quickly as a flash of lightning, and left her more resolute than before, but it had been there. She and her cavalier awoke to the business of the moment together, and her fingers soon closed over the rein, as artistically as though she had been accustomed to it, like her instructor, from childhood.

They started. Very carefully on Harry's part, and at a foot's pace.

"How do you feel?" he asked, as they turned out of the Park gates.

"Perfectly well. Why?" Sarah returned, purposely misunderstanding him.

"You knew what I meant. Please answer," and Harry's tone had the least shade of something like command in it.

She noticed this, and looked sharply round at him, answering, after a minute, however,

"I have no new sensations, Mr. Neville, beyond rather enjoying this swaying movement of Jetty's. She and I will be good friends yet," and she stooped and patted her glossy neck.

"Take care—you were not balanced then. Pray," Harry began eagerly, then changed the form of his address to a quiet "You are not mistress of your seat enough yet to play tricks."

"I feel considerably more so than I did at starting," Sarah replied, demurely; and for some half mile they proceeded very successfully.

Then Sarah became impatient of the slow motion of her horse, and eagerly demanded a canter. Young Neville proposed a trot first, and this was at once begun and continued with great satisfaction to both—rather, to all parties, since Jetty was assuredly one concerned, and a most important one—till they reached a very inviting bit of turf by the road side. Jetty, whose old mistress had eschewed hard roads as much as possible, im-

mediately turned on to it; and Sarah, who disapproved such an exercise of independent will, gave her a cut with the whip.

In a moment she bounded into the air. How so great a novice in equestrianism kept her seat was marvellous, but Sarah did; then Jetty, taking the matter entirely into her own hands, started off at her utmost speed, flying through the air like a winged thing, as it seemed to her rider. Away they went, dashing past a lumbering waggon which was approaching in the distance, clearing the little edge of common in a bound or two, and finally disappearing in the bend of the road.

"Follow, Sam, but not too fast—only keep them in sight, if you can," Harry shouted to the groom; and then leaping his own horse over the hedge, crossed the field at an angle at his utmost speed, hoping to intercept Jetty as she gained the brow of a steep hill called Lancing Edge, if not before.

Jetty, yes! He might probably intercept her—the brute—but where would her rider be? and he shuddered at the thought. Why had he ever let her do so mad a thing? He

might have known how it would turn out. To let her mount Jetty—why, that one fact was sufficient to indicate the whole sad story. How mad he must have been to have suffered it! What had he been dreaming of to allow it? What an agony he was in! And how he chafed and fumed as he urged his horse to its utmost speed, taking any leap that came in its way! And then came the unwelcome but slowly admitted thought, that she would do it. No word—no sign from him would have averted the catastrophe.

"Wonderful, wilful, beautiful creature that she was! Would she ever yield to the will of another? Would she be as charming if she did? Possibly not! But had no one any influence over her?" and he thought of her father. "Umph! possibly it might be as well if he had not. Her mother—he had some difficulty in recalling her, but did at last. Well, she did not look as if she could exercise any influence over any one. Not a bad-looking or bad-mannered person; but too passive-looking—afraid to open her lips. Ah! what a home she had had, that attractive, beautiful

creature. If—if some one could win some influence over her, what a glorious woman she might be made!" And he spurred on faster and faster, lest all chance of changing her might be at that very moment, perhaps, lost for ever. "If that dreadful mare had done her serious injury!" And Harry clenched his teeth savagely at the thought.

Meanwhile, Sarah and her steed went careering madly on! At first she found great difficulty in keeping her seat at all, and held fast, for dear life, both pommel and mane; but still retaining the reins, and command enough both of herself and horse to use them in guiding her. By-and-bye she let the mane go, and began to reason on her position, and the probable chances of her fate. Then she took courage and strove, but in vain, to check the beautiful animal's wild career. They came in sight of a turnpike gate—a closed one, to her dismay! Now then her fate was sealed, she thought. What chance was there she could sit and leap, even if Jetty could clear, so formidable a barrier? It seemed, indeed, more than doubtful. She closed her eyes for an instant,

in preparation for the destructive rush that she expected; but the man ran hastily out and flung it open in time, shouting, as he did so,

"A race, a race, ma'am! Are you in for it?"

He stood at the gate after she had passed through, on the look-out for her competitors. Had slang been so universally popular in those days as now, Sarah might have thought the question problematically a very serious one.

She thought of little now, though, but her own immediate position, and how to improve it. On they went, up hill, down dale, till all trace of what was familiar country to her had long been left far behind; and still Jetty sped on with unabated speed and fire.

Harry came out from his hasty but very long steeple-chase, on the brow of a long and very steep hill, and as he reached it, saw to his relief Jetty and her rider come flying up at a swinging gallop. He stationed himself at the narrowest part of the road, and as Sarah came within hearing, shouted to her that he would be sure to catch her bridle as she passed if she would loosen it a little.

"No, no," was her reply, scarcely audible from the pace at which she was going, only the determined shake of the head accompanying it assisted his comprehension, while, to his astonishment, she guided the horse out of his way, and passed him at the fullest speed.

Very pale she was, and Jetty's black sides were flecked with white foam. Though a little comforted from seeing the way in which she sat close in her saddle, swaying only with the motion of the horse, Harry anxiously watched what would be the next move of horse and rider, as he followed at a respectful distance.

To his bewilderment he saw Sarah—yes, he was sure of it—again using the whip; but this time Jetty only bounded forward. For nearly two miles he followed her, and then he saw her stop—turn—and quietly guide Jetty up to him, panting and submissive!

Very pale she certainly was still; but there was a strange light and fire in her eye, a triumphant curl on her lip!

"You are bent on interfering with my dis-

cipline, Mr. Neville," she said—" with Jetty as with Charon."

" Thank God you are safe!" Harry exclaimed hastily and heartily, and his own face showed traces of past emotion.

Sarah saw it, and the voice was softer, gentler than it had ever been since she played a child at her mother's knee, in which she said,

" You were in care for me, Mr. Neville! It was a chance, I thought myself—safety or destruction—but I have conquered, you see. Henceforth Jetty will be obedient."

" How—what do you mean?"

" Why, that I have taught her whose will is strongest. It was for her own pleasure she galloped off in the way you saw, and for her own she went on and on to the foot of that hill. But it was my pleasure and my whip that urged her up it, and some way beyond."*

" How brave and fearless you are!" exclaimed Harry with irrepressible admiration in his tone.

Sarah laughed—*almost* a genial laugh it was, too.

* A true incident.

"I suppose mounting Jetty, in spite of all your warnings, was a tolerable proof of that; but, bah! how much does it go for?" and she sneered, as though to indemnify her nature for the momentary lapse from it in manner and tone during the first part of her speech.

Jetty was obedient henceforth. She had recognised her master in the girl who had taken the first ride of her life on her, and with such a marvellously courageous spirit.

A few more rides, and Sarah was as perfect a horsewoman as Miss Mannering herself, and with a far larger amount of natural nerve, which goes very far, if it be not the chief ingredient for making a good rider. The exercise gave her great pleasure, not only in itself, and in the gratification it always gave her to mould other wills to her own, but in the independent freedom of action it afforded her. She could ride when, where, how she liked; and sometimes she chose her rides should be entirely unattended, which was a great grievance and trial to her pseudo riding-master, for to such a position poor Harry Neville ruefully felt himself reduced.

Occasionally she only took a groom, but most often she allowed Harry the happiness of accompanying her, perfectly indifferent to the observations and surmises such companionship gave rise to. One morning they had ridden into Merestown together, and as they passed down the High Street an evil smile—for it *was* evil in its intense scorn and contempt—rose to Sarah's lips, as she saw the familiar faces of her former neighbours peering out at and watching them.

What would not Hester have given to have taken her place?

Did she herself care for it? Pshaw! she had other graver matters to occupy her mind than the petty envy of all the country towns in the United Kingdom, and she impatiently urged Jetty forward to their own old door. Harry helped her to dismount, and watched her wistfully into the house. She read his thoughts, and turning sharply round, said indifferently,

"Pray do not trouble yourself about going back with me by-and-by. I can manage perfectly well alone."

Trouble! His only trouble was not being asked into that house, and Sarah knew this perfectly well, as he felt convinced. His simple answer was,

"What time shall I be here?"

"I shall not leave till six, probably," and she disappeared along the passage, old Rachel closing the door after her.

"What on earth can she do shut up in that quaint old place?" thought Harry. "I've a great idea she does not stay there all the time. I'll watch."

And so he did, and the result was that Sarah found herself face to face with him when half way up the street two hours after, her whole attire changed, and the old garments worn when she paid that first visit to Newman's Buildings wrapped about and disguising her, not so fully as in the dim winter days, though, and not at all from young Neville.

He started and changed colour.

Not so Sarah. She stopped, and, looking penetratingly and fixedly into his face, said,

"A noble employment, Mr. Neville! I

gave you more credit than you deserved, apparently, when believing a spy was the last of your characters!"

Harry did not defend or excuse himself; he simply answered,

"Why walk alone, when I should be so glad to go with you?"

"Because I choose. It is enough that you are for ever riding with me, sir. I walk alone. And remember," she added determinedly, "if I find I cannot walk about the streets of my native town in peace and unwatched, I ride alone!"

"You are in a hard humour to-day," Harry answered, but he did not urge his suit further, nor even linger by her side. It was ungenerous as well as unwise to watch her. Had she not a perfect right to go where she pleased, and was Merestown not, as she reminded him, her native town? So he passed resolutely on, and did not look back even once.

Sarah did, and as he turned the end of the street, smiled, and muttered,

"No, Harry Neville; you would scarcely admire Tony Hicks."

CHAPTER IX.

NO good result had followed Frank Marsden's investigations of the Lee Manor estate business. All was strictly legal. Every spoliation had a precedent. Every advantage taken would have been, if not sanctioned by any court of law in Christendom, yet enforcedly left unattacked. Stephen Lockstone had known what he was about perfectly well.

There was not the shadow of a case for Messrs. Sharpe, Kewter, and Watchemklose, but there was a very great deal to enrage and disgust their young agent's honest nature. The ex-agent had had his own interests very much at heart, those of his employer not at all, and had acted accordingly, but carefully avoiding throughout any procedure which could be legally objected to, or even exposed in the public papers with any rational chance

of one universal cry of shame, or such an amount of odium attaching to him as would make his ill-gotten gains a penalty in lieu of a pleasure to him.

No; he had only done as many another had done before him, as many another will do again. Not so much even possibly as some rogues might have ventured, considering the peculiar temptations and opportunities of the case.

Frank spared no pains, let not the most insignificant matter pass uninvestigated, but to no purpose. He examined, read, re-read, inquired, dived into old title-deeds, routed up every mortgage claim now discharged by Stephen Lockstone, saw the mortgagees, and took up their time and his own to no purpose, by trying to ferret out non-existing flaws of some kind or another, in vain. Stephen Lockstone was unassailable at every point, in every particular. An honest man he was not. None could read half the papers, or cursorily examine matters even, without discovering that. But he had rather left undone what it was his place to do, than done what he should

have left undone. Although his was more passive than active sin against his employer, the result was the same, and there could be very little doubt the anticipation of that result had guided and influenced him. Yet it was not so easy to convict him, or, rather, it was impossible to discover any grounds for indicting him. He had only done wisely as to the mammon of unrighteousness, after the ordinary manner of unjust stewards.

Slowly and sorrowfully had Frank arrived at this conclusion; with yet greater sorrow communicated it to those more immediately concerned. For though he had striven from the first to prepare them for such a result, the shock and trial were scarcely less. It shut the door on all hope; and till that door was thus irrevocably closed, they had not known how great a difference it made. Almost unconsciously they had been cheered and supported by the dependence on a hope which had existed none the less that it had been unacknowledged even to themselves. Now all was over. That daily life in Newman's Buildings was to go on as a certainty, with no prospect

of a better life shining in the distance to brighten its dull monotony and relieve the tedium of its stagnation.

The chill that crept over poor Mrs. Lee's heart as she heard the words, prepared though she had believed herself, proved how she had still clung to the one bent straw wherewith it had seemed possible they might stem the flood of their misfortune.

A dreary sense of hopeless desolateness threatened to take possession of Mabel's every feeling when she knew all had been done; that the young lawyer's mission, though most ably fulfilled, had failed, was over, and he about to carry the final conviction of that failure to his employers. What a prospect was before them! The upright square little house seemed more common, possessing less of possible beauty or comfort than ever—the room would *not* look like home. The plaintive petitions to "go back" periodically made by the poor old man; his fretful exactions of all the petty forms and usages, a natural part of happier times, but so difficult and trying in their observance now; the patient suffering in

her mother's face; the uncomplaining efforts to make all seem at its best—above all, to make it cheerful for her, Mabel; the long weary days, the hot summer when the sun seemed to scorch and bake up her own faculties as thoroughly as he did the pretence of a lawn, six feet by eight; the chilly winter, when her father shivered on one side in the small draughty room, while complaining of being scorched on the other,—they would all have to be endured, lived through now, and without one lingering hope of better days.

In the first steady look at the prospect now so certainly before them, it seemed more than could be borne. All energy, life, faith seemed for the moment to be extinguished with that long lingering hope, cherished unawares so long, and Mabel bent her young head in a sort of despair, while a cry for help and strength, a rekindling of that light of duty, which seemed utterly put out in obscure and bitter darkness, went up from the desolate heart.

"Poor Edward! It will be more of a disappointment to him than to us," observed Mrs.

Lee, trying to rally all her powers of cheerful submission. "He has very much depended on a different result, I am afraid, Mr. Marsden, and has not been on the spot like ourselves to be gradually prepared for disappointment."

"I feel it so deeply myself," said Frank, in a low, moved tone, "I am no fit comforter for you, Mrs. Lee. It is terrible!"

"I am afraid, too, he will blame himself for not interfering before," she went on hesitatingly; "forgetting how young he was, and that—that it would hardly have done."

Frank did not answer, save by some almost inaudible ejaculation. He did not like to tell her that something might have been done—something saved, at any rate, if steps had been taken before, and he could not speak falsely, even to comfort.

"Do you think," again began the poor lady, as though she was conscious of what was passing in his mind, "it would have made any difference had we stirred in the matter before?—that this dreadful man might have been checked then, though now it is too late?"

"Too late!"

Mabel raised her head quickly, and Frank started as if a serpent had bitten him. Those words! He would never hear them henceforth without a feeling of self-reproach as regarded himself; of impotent, helpless rage against—oh! could he but know whom! Why had he hesitated, delayed, why not have broken the cabinet open at all risks? He ought to have done so. His own weak folly had ruined everything—taken away the last chance.

So he was wont to think and reason now—naturally enough. Who do not think, when they discover that their suspicions regarding anything were well-founded, that had they risked a small evil, they would probably have secured a great good, forgetful that suspicions are not certainty—that a known risk has more weight than the simple chance of a possible good?—in short, that it is impossible to act in uncertainty as in certainty—and that the result might have been reversed?

Mrs. Lee looked at young Marsden with mild surprise, as he had marched off to the window instead of answering her question.

Mabel guessed what was passing in his mind, and rousing herself from her own depression, came to the rescue.

"Dearest mother, it would only be more sad for us to feel sure of that, if it is so," she said, mournfully. "Let us rest in the consciousness of having acted for the best—as I am sure you and Edward did."

Frank turned at the sound of Mabel's voice; the low and sad, though sweet, accents pierced to his heart, and he looked on her with a feeling of unutterable tenderness and compassion. She had shared his private hopes and fears—the secret!—and necessarily on her the disappointment fell with double force. What would he not give to discover the faintest clue to the perpetrator of that theft? Deborah's history of her proceedings, her certainty that no one had or could have been into the house while she was away, had only served to double the mystery of its accomplishment, while in no way altering the fact. He had inquired on all sides with a certain reserve, for he did not think it desirable, on many accounts, to make the affair public, but with as bad success

as in the more open business he had in hand. The large family inhabiting No. 6, whose father was a hard-working man in the head linendraper's establishment at Merestown, and who had themselves, from the careworn mother down to the slip-shod maid, more occupation of their own to get through than they ever achieved in the course of the day, were about as likely to ransack Merestown old church-tower as to surreptitiously abstract a paper from old Mr. Lee's cabinet. They held him in too much awe still, for one reason, if there had not existed a hundred others. Deborah had carelessly, as it seemed, but cautiously questioned them, and had ascertained that no soul had entered their (No. 5) gate from the time when she had gone out, till her return.

"No, indeed, Mrs. Deborah," affirmed the elder daughter, a slatternly but rather fine-grown girl of fourteen; "and I should have been sure to see them if they had, for I was up at the attic window all day at work."

"And used your eyes more than your needle, I'll be bound!" grunted Deborah, somewhat ungraciously.

As to the newly-done-up house, No. 4, no human being inhabited that, except the disreputable old man whose inspection of Mabel had once so affronted Marsden. He spent most of his time in the town at the "publics," Deborah conjectured; at any rate, she could unwillingly witness to the certainty of his not having been at home that day, for he had met her, and "dared to offer to carry her basket; as if I'd trust it to the likes of him!" and the indignant Deborah, having told all she could, and all she knew, trotted off to her own domains, leaving the mystery darker and denser than ever.

And so Frank Marsden was constrained to leave it at last, though most reluctantly. Indeed, it was with by no means willing steps that he left Merestown at all; lingering there to the last, hoping he scarce-knew for what. And finally, when his last adieux were absolutely spoken, and he turned out of No. 5, with Dr. Armsdaile, who had insisted on driving him back into the town, his face wore such an expression of gloom and depression, that it necessarily became the legitimate object

of the old man's raillery as soon as they got into the carriage.

"Well, Frank, my boy, you haven't swallowed a small statue of Niobe, by mistake, have you?" he asked, pretending at the same time to feel his pulse. "You give me something of that idea; and that she was disagreeing with you frightfully."

Frank coloured.

"It isn't pleasant, sir, to come to help people, and leave them in a worse mess than you found them," he answered, a little curtly.

"No—that's true; but a *worse* mess?—I don't understand that. You have only proved there was no possible way out of it, which most of us shrewdly guessed before—eh? Some few weeks back, now, there might have been a loop-hole, if they hadn't, in their tenderness, good souls, left it till too late."

Frank winced. How everybody seemed bent on using that very obnoxious sentence, since it had become fraught with so much regret, so much painful meaning, to himself!

"How do you mean a worse mess?" reiterated the Doctor.

"Isn't it worse, sir, to lose every vestige of the one hope you had?" Frank answered, a little evasively.

It was no use to let another into their mystery, as no good could be gained by it. And, after all, as he had tried to comfort Mabel by suggesting, the lost paper might have been of no real moment. He did not believe this himself, and it would have given small comfort to him if he had; but he hoped to induce her to give some admission to the idea, and to gather consolation from it.

"Well, there's something in that," returned the Doctor, meditatively. "I say, young man," he resumed, after a pause, "what have you done with your lantern? I quite believed you went up to town to get it the other day—yet I see no signs of it."

Frank smiled. "I will bring it down next time I come, perhaps, sir—if I see occasion for it."

"Next time! I thought you had done all you could do—that is, just nothing but mischief, as you say, which is about all you lawyers ever do do, in my opinion, and that you were off for good and all this time."

"So I am as regards the business," answered Frank, with some little embarrassment; "but Mrs. Lee has kindly asked me to visit them again. It is very dull for your poor patient, you know, sir, and I hope I am some little amusement to him."

"Umph!" was all the reply to this Dr. Armsdaile vouchsafed. "And when shall you be likely to pay your first charitable visit?" he inquired presently, a vein of irony in his tone.

"Oh! that is quite impossible for me to say. I shall have a great deal of work to attend to when I first get back; and I—I have promised—Miss—Mrs. Lee thought, that is, if I wrote myself to her son, I could explain matters more satisfactorily, or, rather, less painfully, to him than a brief lawyer's letter would. I shall have to do that, too, and it is not a pleasant task," and Frank sighed.

"No; writing to the son is not so agreeable as amusing the father," said the Doctor, drily; "I can well believe that. You cannot tell, then, when you will be down next?"

"I wish I could," was the earnest answer; "it will be as soon as I possibly can."

"No doubt," and again Dr. Armsdaile's emphasis was sarcastic.

Frank hardly noticed it this time, for his attention was attracted by a figure in the street, and he dashed his head out so hastily, that, as his companion afterwards observed, "he evidently, and very justly, considered it worth nothing at all, and breaking it of no moment."

"Yes, it is she again," he said, as he drew his head in again. "What an extraordinary girl she must be!—more so than I used to think her, even."

"Of whom may you be talking?" asked Dr. Armsdaile, curiously.

"Of Sarah Lockstone—that was she walking so swiftly down the by-street."

The old man elevated his eyebrows, and shrugged his shoulders.

"I should have thought, Master Frank, you had had enough of that family, without risking your neck for a passing glimpse of the daughter."

Frank laughed good-humouredly.

"I wanted to be certain who it was—her walking about in that fashion is so very extraordinary."

"Upon my word, I fail to see anything singular in a native of Merestown, and that native a young woman, taking a walk down its streets.

"So should I, if the said native did not partially disguise herself for the occasion, Doctor; but I have encountered Miss Sarah before so attired, and had she not thought proper to accost me—attack me, indeed—I should not have had an idea who it was, and I cannot imagine what her object can be."

"To attack you again, perhaps, if you set so much store by her doings," answered Dr. Armsdaile, impatiently, but glancing himself out of the window, nevertheless. "If it were her sister, now, there might be some excuse," and he looked hard at the young man as he spoke.

Frank neither winced nor coloured, but he did smile a little contemptuously.

"I quite differ there, my dear Doctor. I should say there could be none. Sarah Lock-

stone has character, and of a peculiar kind; little interested as I ever felt in her formerly, I could not help seeing that. Hester has none. Yes, I can pronounce the name without faltering—without a tremor even!" as the old man eyed him narrowly and curiously. "The Hester, whose name was once music to my ear, existed only in my imagination. I have long since discovered the real lady is less than nothing to me."

"*Bravissimo!* I congratulate you, Master Frank. The bloom's off the peach, is it?"

"Quite! By the way, what has become of the fair bride? I've not heard her name mentioned since I was told she was married to that disgusting creature Geldfinder the very day I arrived."

"Ah! he's an interesting bridegroom, is he not? However, he suited her exactly—before marriage; how things are now I should be sorry to say. Why, they went a regular tour, in spite of the weather, and, as I hear, are to settle in London. You may chance to encounter them, Frank."

"Possible, but not probable! Mr. Geld-

finder and I are not likely to be travelling exactly along the same social groove. I hope he will be kind to her."

"It hardly looks well, I am afraid," returned the Doctor, "his choosing to settle so very far away from both their families."

"Nay, that is rather hard on him, isn't it? I should have taken her to town," and Frank smiled. How intensely thankful he felt that he had not done so—that he was not going back to her now!

"Ah! yes, that's a widely different thing. This man has no profession, and though he gave up his timber business on his marriage, he might just as well have taken some place, and settled down here."

Like most men who have lived long in the same place, Dr. Armsdaile was attached to Merestown, saw its advantages and merits with much clearer vision than any defects which he could not altogether ignore, as he contrived generally to do, and particularly disliked any of the old inhabitants leaving it who had wherewithal to stay.

"They will come down occasionally, I con-

clude," Frank answered, a little indifferently.

"That's not at all the same thing; though why I should care about the matter, I'm sure I don't know. Frank, my boy," he added, in a different tone, "I am glad, thankful, to see you looking, thinking more like yourself. This yea-nay bit of fickleness did you no serious harm. I should have been disgusted if she had," he pursued, angrily. "With you, I mean. She was not worth half a regret, or five minutes' thought, and you're beginning to know it."

"Begun and finished, my dear sir, long ago."

"Yes. You'll not get the lantern after all, and you're a different being now from what you were when you came."

Frank's cheek flushed a little ere he answered, with some emotion in his voice,

"Who could live in that house as I have done, or very nearly so, and not be changed for the better? They would restore the veriest Timon to his trust in human nature!"

"Umph!" quoth the Doctor again. "They are not so bad, as times go, and I'm glad you like them, Frank."

"Like!" echoed the younger man. "I never knew what *home* could be till I saw it there. The unselfish devotion to that poor old man; the tenderness, the sweet submission to a way of life so different and trying; the thought and care for everyone but self; the excellent principles, the unostentatious daily practice of them; the high tone of moral feeling prevailing; the appreciation of everything good, pure, and beautiful; the——"

"Go on," said the Doctor, "pray!" as Frank came to an abrupt pause, on perceiving how greatly the old man was amused. "Your rhapsody is most telling, your eloquence striking—almost equal to our declamations on prize-giving days at our old school, which we thought specimens of perfection."

"You may laugh," returned Frank, a little resentfully; "but if you had lived years with Stephen Lockstone's family——"

"The fates forbid!" ejaculated the Doctor, with comic terror.

"You would know what impression such a contrast as that of the Lees makes in much less than six months even."

"I've no doubt of it, my boy, and very glad you've still got the sense left to find it out. Still, I knew the Lees almost before you were born. Mabel's a good girl, and I love her dearly, but not quite a divinity yet, Master Frank."

"I never mentioned Miss Lee's name that I know of, sir," exclaimed the young man hastily, and looking alarmed.

"Oh! didn't you? No; it was a mistake of mine, I suppose."

And the Doctor smiled rather mischievously, adding a minute after,

"But now tell me of your own prospects, Frank; you must be getting a well-to-do man, I suspect."

"Yes, tolerably so, and my poor uncle's unlooked-for legacy made me feel almost a rich one; but as to my prospects, I wanted to talk to you of them, sir, particularly. I'm tired of being a lawyer."

"Which means, I suppose, that because you no longer need depend on your own industry for your daily bread, you are hankering after an idle life. I'm heartily sorry to hear it. If

you had twice the fortune you have, I should still bid you keep to your profession. An idle man is seldom a healthy or a happy one."

And Dr. Armsdaile spoke severely.

"I quite agree with you, sir," Frank answered quietly. And this time it was his turn to look mischievous.

"Why, what the devil do you mean, then?" irascibly answered the old man, who was never more put out than when those he much liked seemed about to do either a wrong or a foolish thing.

"I thought I should prefer mounting a step higher in the profession—be a barrister instead of a mere lawyer."

"Oh! oh! Master Frank, casting sheep's eyes on the woolsack, eh? But you can't jump into a wig and gown at once, you know."

"No; and that is exactly why I hesitate—it will cost time and money, but it is a much better position, and more fitting my father's son."

"Your great-grandfather's say, Frank; if you are bent on doing honour to your forefathers, go far enough back, my boy. Your

father, poor man, would have been well content and thankful to see you as you are now. However, I don't think it is an idea to be rejected. How old is it, may I ask?"

And again a queer light shot forth from the old man's eye.

"Upon my word, I'm afraid I did not register its birth quite accurately," the young man answered laughing.

"Since you came here only?"

"Well, yes, I do not think it occurred to me before, certainly."

"I thought not. And when do you propose commencing the transformation?"

"As soon as I can; and that was why I said I should have a good deal to attend to on first returning. I cannot leave the firm without due notice, or the business undone that has been entrusted specially to me. To be sure, I may eat my dinners, keep my terms, and do their work at the same time. The business will not come so hardly to me as on younger and inexperienced men. I shall have to study comparatively little. You think it a good plan, then?"

"On the whole I believe I shall. I don't say I do, mind you, Mr. Judge. I never vote for a great change hastily; I must think it over, but I believe my opinion will go with yours."

"I feel tolerably certain all the work Kewter and those men can give me they will. Once a barrister, I shall not be a briefless one in the outset, at any rate. If I fail it will be my own fault, my own want of talent—but I don't fancy I shall fail. I should like to have the case of this Lee Manor to plead—if one could make a case of it at all, I mean—how I would——"

"Pitch into Stephen Lockstone, I hope. He's enough to make one detest the very name of a lawyer."

"Well, I'm not sure that feeling had not a little to do with my resolve, only I was half ashamed to confess to it. There are some honest men among us after all."

"I hope so. You for one, my boy. Well, here we are; get out and I will come in and talk over this matter a little more."

And the old man leapt briskly out of his carriage and followed Frank into his lodgings.

CHAPTER X.

SARAH LOCKSTONE had been graciously pleased to allow the acceptance of the Neville Castle invitation to lunch; and her father himself had so far overcome his lately dominant sensations of—to all seeming—causeless terror at any intercourse with his fellows, and shrinking from the social calls and usages which the position he had assumed in the county demanded, that he too accompanied them, with only a third of the pressure his daughter had anticipated it would be necessary to employ before he yielded.

Once there, Stephen Lockstone passed muster tolerably well—that is, he was no fool, and could, when a present necessity compelled it, show the rate at which he valued himself, and therefore expected to be valued, unoffensively, but evidently. He took the

smallest possible share in the conversation, betrayed no nervous trepidation, and altogether conducted himself so as to receive at the Countess's hands, in a subsequent family discussion of the party, no further condemnation than the faint praise of—

"The man is not absolutely ill-bred, though one did not feel quite sure whether he was afraid to open his lips, or did not choose to do so."

"I never heard him talk much," observed Harry half apologetically, as though feeling himself called on to defend his protegé.

"You have seen him so often, you must be a capital judge, Harry. Two or three times —which?" Fred asked sarcastically.

"I can't say I think his face a pleasant one," chimed in Lady Charlotte, "there is a down look in it; I don't think he ever met my eye once, though I purposely tried to make him do so."

"A very praiseworthy, charitable proceeding, my dear Charley; when a man is paying his first visit to people so far above him in rank, and hitherto in position also, he may be

excused if he felt rather shy and embarrassed."

"What a dreadfully sententious sentence, Harry! Ugh! I can hardly recover its verbosity."

"I have heard a saying as to the dwellers in glass houses, Madam Charley the alliterative," returned her brother pointedly.

She laughed.

"A truce to all these 'quips and quirks and wreathed' words, brother mine, and let us discuss your swan of the family group quietly and amicably."

"She is the best worth the trouble, I must allow so much," observed Lady Avonsdale. "The man is just passable, so much of him as he allows one to see; the mother is—I really hardly know what to call her. Her timidity is positively past being amusing—it is so great as to be a nuisance."

"I don't think she was half so afraid of all of us together as of her own husband and daughter," suggested Lady Charlotte. "I really pitied her; she looked afraid to choose veal cutlets instead of patties without consulting one or other of them."

"She is just a shade better than a vulgar, pushing, odious person, like that Mrs. Elliot of Alston; she is a decided infliction, and I should wish to submit to it as seldom as may be," and the Countess leant back in her easy chair, as though exhausted by the feat of once entertaining her.

"At least you cannot accuse the daughter of timidity," observed the Honourable Frederick, as, not particularly interested in the matter in debate, he opened one of the French windows, and going out upon the lawn, took his way to the shrubberies.

"She is very handsome—there could not be two opinions on that; but, Harry, do you know I felt terribly afraid of her," and Lady Charlotte gave a little shudder.

"In what way, most courageous *petite*?" returned her brother, with whom this sister was a special favourite.

"Well, that is difficult to explain. Altogether, I believe. She was so entirely at her ease."

"Yes," interposed Lady Avonsdale, "I must allow that much, Harry—your fair *in-*

amorata is perfectly well-bred, however she became so; no *gaucherie* and no affectation—a little too much decision, perhaps, for so young a person."

"A *little*, mamma!" echoed Lady Charlotte in affected astonishment; "well, I should have said a great deal."

"That is exactly what makes her so attractive," hastily interposed Harry. "She is so different from the wishy-washy girls one generally meets. She has opinions of her own, and moral courage to act on them, and is no slave to conventionalities."

"As to that, Harry, I think a little more attention to them might do her no harm, if, as I understand, she is constantly in the habit of riding with you alone. But perhaps I am misinformed?"

"Partly so, of course, my dear mother. When did gossip ever confine itself to truth?"

"Only partly, Harry?" answered the Countess interrogatively.

"Why, my dear mother, I believe I told you myself I had undertaken to give her riding-lessons, and I don't exactly see how I

could accomplish that without going out riding with her. Occasionally we do ride together, *not* constantly.

Lady Avonsdale raised her eyebrows.

"Really, Harry, I think you might be a little more careful. If she knows no better, you do."

"Well, I really do not see anything very terrible in it, mother. We have one groom always, sometimes two at our heels; *au reste*, I don't see any choice in the matter except giving up riding altogether. We cannot very well impress Mrs. Lockstone into our service, and mount her, *nolens volens*, as chaperone. Any other alternative I don't see."

"It may be all very well now," resumed the Countess, as if paying little heed to his last speech. "What Miss Lockstone may choose to do matters very little, and will be little commented on, probably—by anyone whose opinions signify, I mean, of course; but if she ever becomes Mrs. Neville, all this will be raked up, depend upon it, Harry, and discussed very unpleasantly, to say the least. You ought to consider that."

Poor Harry winced a little! In his inmost heart he faithfully believed that no one would ever dare utter a word approaching to disparagement of Sarah, in any circles she frequented; at any rate, not so that she should ever be cognizant of the same, certainly; but he was not sure, having great faith in his mother's opinion, that there was not something in what she had said, though not altogether in the full sense she had meant it. While he hesitated what to answer, his father, who had been partly reading the newspaper, partly taking in the conversation, came to his rescue with—

"It's just as well this sort of thing shouldn't go on too long. You're quite right, my dear, but no harm's been done yet, I expect. These people are too little known in the county, among our set generally, for what the girl does now to be much noticed, or remembered, unless its wonderfully *outré*, of course, I mean."

"She looks as if she would do as she liked in all things and ways—let who may talk," said Lady Charlotte, *sotto voce.*

"Ah! by the way," cried her brother, not

sorry to let the other matter drop, "and now let us know the reason why you feel afraid —and being so, are not even ashamed to confess it—of this young lady. Generally, Charley, you reverse the picture, making all the poor victims in white muslin and blue sashes, who come palpitating here, tremble before the august presence of your high and mighty self, the Lady Charlotte Neville, of that ilk, which comprises, as I believe, some eight feet square of boudoir, and as much of flower garden! But proceed with your indictment, I am all eager attention."

"I am not sure I can convey my reasons to you, Harry, so as to make you understand."

"Which doubt, interpreted Daniel-wise, means you have no reasons at all! Just as I anticipated, Charley."

"No, you are quite wrong; but if the thing were not impossible, I could show you what I mean, much more easily than describe it. First, she looks at you straight in the face with those large eyes of hers, as if she was examining some new specimen of a strange sort of animal."

"So she was," laughed Harry; "you were a perfectly new specimen of the genus young woman to her!"

"Nonsense, Harry, you know what I mean! She does not simply look at you, but it is a fixed penetrating gaze."

"In short, she uses her eyes in the way nature intended, straightforwardly—not drooped one minute, sideways the next, and only in a direct line once in a way for half a moment, perhaps."

"If you keep interrupting so, I won't say another word. It is just as if she were measuring your intellect—valuing its worth, as it were; at a very low rate, she does it too, I fancy—wondering what puerile nothing one will say next. I literally felt perfectly ashamed of asking if the drive had been pleasant, or the roads dusty, with that look on me. It seemed such an absurd thing—speeches just said for want of something else."

"And weren't they?"

"Now, Harry, you are a great deal too provoking! You know, as well as I do, that one doesn't get up metaphysical discussions,

or polemical arguments, by way of entertaining young ladies at a luncheon party; yet I felt just as if I must dash into something fearfully deep, and out of the way, if I had to endure that scrutinizing much longer—I felt so—so small."

"Exactly; so, because your self-love was wounded, my dear sister, and you met your match for once in a way, you choose to convert poor innocent Miss Lockstone into an alarming—blue, shall I call it? She can't help the misfortune of possessing brains, can she?"

"It is perfectly useless discussing the subject with you, Harry, as I foresaw—only you are even worse than I anticipated—you not only dispute my facts, but wilfully misunderstand them. She is not a blue, or anything the least like one, I should say; but she is abominably satirical, and takes no pains not to show her contempt of the major part of her fellow-creatures."

"I have heard you admire satire—declare you enjoyed being the subject of it, even."

"Yes, genial, legitimate satire."

"Ah! indeed; I was not aware there was more than one kind. Define."

"You won't like my definition of hers, I give you fair warning; I should call it a cold, contemptuous disbelief in anything good and true—or rather my belief is that her satire springs from such a source."

"Now, you are getting beyond bounds, Charley," her brother said gravely—"out of my depths, certainly, and I hope out of your own. You have no right to judge her motives, and that is what you are doing."

"No, I did not mean to do that, but to explain what I feel about her, and that is very difficult; and you make it more impossible by your continual provocations. She seems to regard everybody merely as a possible fund of amusement, to calculate how much absurdity she may reckon on extracting from the words and conduct of each fresh individual she meets—I can't fancy her making allowance for one mistake, one shortcoming. She would glory in them, but despise the unlucky wight who committed either; and I, at any rate, have no fancy for being a con-

tinual butt for contemptuous scorn and ill-natured satire; though to be one occasionally for the last, all in good fellowship, is not such bad fun."

"Well, Charley, all you have said amounts, so far as I see, to this, that you have taken a decided dislike to Miss Lockstone, and are thoroughly prejudiced against her."

"Not at all, Harry. I am afraid of her, I tell you; but I don't dislike her yet, and I may misjudge her. She is no ordinary person, at any rate."

"No; and you must remember her home associations have, I should imagine, been anything rather than calculated to develop the best points in her character."

"Exactly. Those are all left for you, my dear Harry, to exercise your powers on; and, oh! what wonders you mean and expect to effect, don't you?" and Lady Charlotte left the room, giving a caressing tug to her brother's whisker as she passed him.

Their father and mother had gone away before, so Harry was left all alone to ruminate on the success of the luncheon, and on all the

opinions he had heard on the guests during their discussion. Not that he particularly cared for any, except what touched on Sarah herself. Mr. and Mrs. Lockstone had gone through the ordeal quite as well, rather better than he expected—indeed, to say the real truth, he troubled his head very little about them. He so rarely saw either, and they were so very seldom recalled to his memory by any reference made to them by their daughter, that he was sometimes in danger of forgetting their existence altogether."

He was not quite satisfied as to the impression made by the woman he was learning to admire more and more every day; but then, as he consoled himself with reflecting, "They thought so very much about those little absurd *bienséances*, that were beneath her notice even, they could not affect her really; and as to the desirability of their practice in certain stations, why, she would very soon comprehend that quite as far as was desirable or necessary, and learn to acquit herself of them —far better than those who might now cavil at her want of knowledge of them. As

to other points, it was not to be expected such a girl would be a universal favourite at once. He should not at all like it, much less expect it—if she were, she would be different, not herself; and in her peculiarity, her being so superior to the ordinary run of young ladies, lay her great attraction. Once really known —ah! who could then fail to appreciate her?

So ran Harry Neville's thoughts; and he was losing himself in the contemplation of those virtues with which his imagination had endowed Stephen Lockstone's youngest daughter, when the memory of what his mother had said regarding their *tête-à-tête* rides, her opinion, and her caution, recurred to and troubled him.

He thought over the difficulty long, and deeply, for him; and having at length resolved, though not without many misgivings, on a method of conquering it, he hurried off to dress for dinner, only five minutes before the gong gave warning that it was on table.

When the grandmothers of the present generation were girls, before messages were

even partly conveyed across the Atlantic in five minutes, when housemaids did not request permission to use their mistresses' pianos, to "keep up their music," when distance was not so completely annihilated by steam and science as it is now, when "going a-head" was not the one universal motto, from the head cabinet minister down to the last tyro of the ragged school, though possessions went for much, they did not go for all—at least, not in distant counties; and the *nouveaux riches*, the *bourgeois* buyers of old landed estates, the *parvenus* occupying the place of the old families whose purses would not keep pace in growth with their pedigrees, were not so immediately welcomed, their acquired position acknowledged, and themselves received so much as a matter of course, or so easily, as is most generally the case now, when money, the root of all evil though it may be, is generally considered a sufficient equivalent for the lack of ancestors or escutcheons, and when the comforts and amusements its possession affords, are deemed more than a set-off against any slight failures in the way of re-

finement and high-breeding.

So the Lockstones were not so instantly accepted as neighbours and allies by the old county families about Merestown as might have been the case a quarter of a century later; and, without any special suspicion regarding Stephen Lockstone's fair dealing, people were in no hurry to welcome him as possessor of his late employer's estate. Indeed, but for the peculiarities attendant on the later generations of Lees, which had so separated them from real intercourse with their equals, they might have been even less so.

Some called—some few followed the Castle Neville example, and invited the family to their houses; others who had large families and needy sons, remembered that the attorney had only daughters, and began to think it might not be a bad speculation to cultivate an intimacy with the family. Sarah's beauty won great admiration, and might have attracted some attention, had not her manner generally repelled more than her appearance could attract. Harry Neville alone could brave her cold indifference and

mocking sarcasm. Others, like his sister, admired her much, but feared her more. All this Sarah Lockstone knew, and while she scorned the whole company—fathers, mothers, sons, and daughters—she delighted in her own power, and revelled in the amusement the foibles of her fellow-beings afforded her. For a time she rather encouraged a certain amount of intercourse and sociability; the phase of society was new to her, and, therefore, at first, in a measure interesting.

"You were at an archery meeting yesterday," Harry Neville said to her one morning, as she came out on the sweep ready equipped for her ride.

She did not answer, only slightly arched her eyebrows as she looked at him, as though she would have said, but for the waste of breath, "Why state so old and common-place a fact? I did not contradict it."

"You did not tell me you were going," Harry went on, a little reproachfully.

"Why should I? You never asked, that I know of—and really it was not a matter of life and death, was it?"

"It was a matter of pleasure or no pleasure to me, at any rate."

"How?"

"First, I came over hoping to see you, and found you gone to the Greshams'; secondly, I had an invitation and refused. If I had known you were to be there, I should have accepted."

Sarah gave a rather impatient jerk to her foot, pulling up her habit with equal impetuosity as she did so.

"I should say any one regulating his visits by another's deserved your fate!"

"Why?"

"It is great folly to rule your life by a second. What can result from it but continual cross purposes, raps, and bruises?"

"That depends whether the one life is willing to accompany the other, I should imagine!"

"And what one, or rather who, ever was?" and she turned quickly round on him, to flash a light of mocking disdain from her eyes, while her lip curled contemptuously; but as she caught the expression on Harry's face, her

own changed slightly, at least so he thought, but she turned away so rapidly he could not be certain.

"You would pretend you have no faith in the reality of human affection?" he said, sadly.

"Rather say no faith in the affection itself."

"Nay, that could hardly be."

"Can one have faith in what does not exist?"

"You would hardly assert there is no such thing as love in the world—mother's love, for example?"

"If you call it so, yes. Yonder cat fondles her kittens till they grow old, and bite and quarrel with her. Human beings imagine themselves very fond of others till they cross their path, cross it in little things or great—small matter which—then they can snarl and swear in their own way, just like the cats. What is such affection, if you must needs call it so?"

"You are in one of your evil moods again to-day!" Harry said, gravely, as he went closer to her. "You are not speaking from your better nature. You know the reverse, if you cared to remember it."

"Pshaw! I know nothing of the sort! Only that I am wearied out waiting for these horses. Here they come at last! Now for a gallop on the Downs, Jetty!"

She was soon in her saddle, and Harry indulged her humour by speaking no word further till they had not only crossed the park, and traversed a long bit of road, but had had some minutes' gallop over a fine stretch of down. As they at last drew bridle, he turned towards her and said, smiling as he caught her eye—he never yet had been able to look at her for a minute together without meeting it,

"I am reconnoitering! A little stormy still, and clouds about, but fairer, and, on the whole, more promising."

"Don't be too sure," Sarah answered, sharply; but she smiled a little, nevertheless.

"I will venture a question I wanted to put just now. Have you ever seen any human affection in whose truth you can believe?"

"I was going to say no, but I am not sure. I have seen, and in a young girl, too, proofs of patient attention and care, which, if not springing from affection—and they may not—

are marvels of self-martyrdom!"

"And undoubtedly sincere in that case, at any rate," chimed in young Neville, eagerly.

"That case. It had escaped me that I mentioned it," she said coldly, and with some surprise and doubt in her manner.

"Nor did you. I assumed it must be disinterested, and therefore sincere."

"Yes," she replied slowly, "you are right so far, I suppose."

"And should I be wrong to believe what exists in one instance may in more?"

"Very exceptional."

"Never mind, I might dispute even that, and successfully, I fancy. But I am content with proving it does sometimes appear, so that you concede the point."

"It's hardly worth disputing," she returned indifferently.

"Yes, if I have an object to gain by doing so."

"And have you?"

And Sarah turned her beautiful face upon him. Not, however, in surprise; passionless, impassive, cold, it was guiltless of all expression at the

moment, as the young man felt in despair. But he roused himself to his self-appointed task in spite of it.

"Yes, I have. To convince you that sincere mutual affection makes life a much pleasanter, brighter thing than it can be without."

And Harry, though his voice trembled nervously, spoke out boldly, and looked as well as he could into her face.

A strange quiver passed over it for an instant—only for an instant; then it resumed the hard expression once again, and she said carelessly, "*A quoi bon?*"

"Sarah Lockstone, why ask that? You know what I mean. You know I love you; you know," and Harry Neville forgot all his resolutions to be calm and cold as herself, and spoke hotly and impetuously, "it is the hope of my life to win you for my bride. I admired you the first moment I saw you; I have learnt to love you better than any woman upon earth, and I would give all I possess to convince you of the happiness it would be to me to make you my wife, to teach you practi-

cally that there is such a thing as sincere human love in the world."

Sarah had resolutely kept her face away from him while he spoke. Now she turned suddenly, and looked at him long and fixedly, as though she would have read into his soul. He never flinched from that penetrating gaze, and devoured her beauty with his own in return, so far as anxiety would permit him to do so.

"Harry Neville, I could not have believed you such a fool."

Slowly, deliberately came the words, but there was a gentler look than common on the face. He gathered something of hope from it.

"For loving you?"

"For fancying that you do."

"Why say that, when you know better, Sarah? You are my first, my only love. Do not cast me off. At least, do not bid me utterly despair. I will wait, I will do anything you will, only——"

"I will, then, that you forget this delusion as soon as may be."

"I cannot—I cannot; it is no delusion,

Sarah. I beseech you to give me a right to love and cherish you—to teach you all that a happy home affection brings with it. I—Sarah, you do not love another?"

And his whole voice and manner changed.

"No; be at rest on that head. I have no thought of loving any one; and listen—it is not by any means an assured fact that the Manor and all its broad domains will ever be mine—rather it is a very doubtful one, so be comforted."

And a very sinister look came up over her face.

A crimson flush of anger suffused Harry Neville's brow, and glowed under the curls of his chestnut hair; for a moment he was tempted to ride off there and then, forget that such a being as Sarah Lockstone existed, and —he did not know exactly what beside, for before he had well reached that point, his mind had changed again. He rode resolutely up to Jetty's side, laid so vigorous a grasp on her rider's arm that she perforce yielded to the vigour of his masculine sinews, and turned so that he could face her. He did so deter-

minedly, but with no shade of the moment's past passion of anger and disappointment either in look or tone as he said reproachfully,

"I will try and forget those last words of yours; I did not deserve them, and you know it. Now, listen to me once again, and, if you can, give me a less hopeless answer. I love you truthfully, Sarah, and would give much to wake an answering affection in you, but I do not ask you to marry me without it. Your nature would revolt at such a step; but I do ask you, if your heart is free, let me try to awake some interest in it; let me be with you as I have been—only be the memory with you still, that I have asked you for my wife, and that to make you so is the dearest wish of my heart."

For perhaps the first time in her life, Sarah did not return continuously the eager gaze fixed on her face throughout this speech. At first she looked at him with an odd mixture of doubt and suspicion in her expression, then her eyes fell and fixed themselves on Jetty's ane, and there remained till Harry Neville

had closed his speech. Raising them then, she said, and rather earnestly for her,

"Mr. Neville, when I told you I have no thought of loving anyone, I spoke the truth. I have not—in truth, I do not believe it is in my nature to care for such matters, like other girls. I can give you no hope of any change in me—if you choose to keep on our friendship on these terms, so be it; only I do not deceive or mislead you in any way, remember."

So the compact was sealed, and Harry, not unhappy, for he had faith in his own warm love to kindle hers sooner or later, brought her back to the Park gates, where, leaving her in her groom's charge, he took his way back to Castle Neville.

Sarah slowly paced up the long avenue to the door of the Manor House. There, instead of dismounting, she dismissed the man, and suddenly wheeling Jetty round, gave her a signal the mare knew well, and was ever glad to obey. One bound took horse and rider to the side of the haha which separated the garden on one side from the Park. This was cleared in a leap which would have at once

sickened and charmed Harry Neville to behold, so gracefully did the fearless rider sit, so beautifully the mare take the fence, which was not an easy one to jump. Once over this, a long smooth glade of turf stretched away for a couple of miles, and along it Jetty now carried her mistress at a pace which made them seem to have wings, so rapidly did they dash along.

The race over, and the house regained, Sarah went into her own room, flung off her hat and habit, without ringing for her maid; and then, as though the gallop had not yet stilled the tumult of her mind, she began to pace up and down the room, her brain very busy, her face varying from its worst expression to a something softer than it had ever worn before. Something in this way ran her varying thoughts:

"So, it is as I expected, then—even the Earl of Avonsdale would risk having Stephen Lockstone's daughter for his son's wife, for the sake of the broad lands she might bring. What would he think if he knew all the title deeds? Nothing remarkably different,

if he believed them secure. As to the boy—well, he is a fool; he—what is there in him that sometimes wins me from my very nature, in spite of myself? He too would like a bride dowered with the Manor, doubtless—he is not the elder son; and though he fancies, or would teach me to fancy him exempt from all such ideas, he is a man, as I am a woman, and he would like it. At least—pshaw! the boy would make me false to myself, if I yielded belief; yet he is honest, true—folly, he shall not influence me thus! What is he, that he should step between me and my life-long thoughts? Am I to be swerved by the first man who has truth in his blue eyes, and sings me long ditties of folly about his love for me? What am I coming to? Not that—I will not. Ah! Hester, you made a great mistake; it is a thousand pities you did not wait—who knows but you might have been a countess!—I would have yielded my chance willingly. I should not envy Mr. Geldfinder the first ten hours of his life if she ever did contrive to discover what might have been. It would be worth some trouble to tell

her; only, if she were here, *I* might have to endure her regrets instead of her husband. No, I could not stand that quite. So, Harry Neville, you really imagine you want to marry me? Frank Marsden would warn you against 'catching a Tartar.'"

CHAPTER XI.

THE summer sun was shining gloriously down, in all the full splendour of his midsummer radiance. He was lighting up the beautiful dark bowers of foliage in the park of the Manor; he was persistently working his way between the windows and the ill-fitting blinds at No. 5, Newman's Buildings, and thereby driving poor Mabel to despair by neutralising all her efforts to keep the room some degrees lower than fever point. He was glowing in fond admiration over the gorgeous geraniums and cloves that shed their delicious fragrance about the lawn of the Lees' old home; he was curiously peeping in on every bit of gilding possessed by their new one; perpetually dazzling their eyes by close investigation of a picture frame, a tiny glass in an oval frame—above all, of the quaintly-cut locks of the old cabinet, which

possessed special powers of attracting his inquisitive rays; so, at least, it seemed to the pale, weary girl, who had some difficulty in preventing her eyes from continually resting on it while alone, and was powerless to keep her father's attention directed for very long into other channels, while it was continually attracted to it as if by the unusual lustre of its polished surface. You could not raise your eyes, indeed, but they were sure to be caught by the brightness of one or other of those tiny brass plates on the unlucky cabinet!

How Mabel shrank from those dazzling spots of brightness! They seemed so many mocking eyes laughing at her hopeless endurance; cruelly rejoicing in their safe keeping of that secret, whatever it was, which had become a very sad reality to the young girl, only when its discovery was lost to her for ever! The sight of the old cabinet at all times was to her a constant trial—a minor one, it might be, but deeply felt. And do not those minor trials, as they are called, when daily, hourly met, eat deep into the heart that en-

dures them, cutting away slowly but surely much of our enjoyment in existence?

As Mabel now looked out on the summer scene, she felt as though the sun of her own young life had set—set in a bank of dark, heavy, all-enveloping clouds, never to rise any more!

Frank Marsden had not only carried off with him the ashes of the last faint hope of better times, but every vestige of brightness, however shaded, of comfort however small, in the present. At least so it seemed to Mabel, who now found each occupation a weariness, each little recreation, so rare to her, and in former days so prized, dull—stale—unprofitable!

She did not know till now how complete had been her trust in a restoration to the Manor, sooner or later. It must have been so, and that hope had made the life so easy, almost pleasant to her in its first novelty, which now seemed sometimes almost unendurable! else surely she should have been as miserable then as now—more so, for had she not just parted with Edward then—Edward,

her own dear brother—and—Mr. Marsden. He was a stranger compared with him, very kind, very good—so thoroughly so, she hoped Edward would be like him—just like him when he was his age. How proud and fond she would be of him then, she thought. But he was not her brother—only papa liked him, and missed him so, now he was gone, that was why it all seemed so very, very dull and different. He said he should come and see them, but London was so far off—not so far as America, certainly; but a long way, and it was not likely he would often think of them up there; why should he? He had done so much for them—all he could—more than he needed, and it was not at all probable, in all the bustle and occupation of his London engagements, he would find time to come to them often. Often—perhaps he might not come at all! And the colour which had mantled over Mabel's cheeks, and tinged her fair brow in the progress of her young girl soliloquy, suddenly fled, and left her very pale!

Of course he would not come! Merestown could not be a pleasant place to him, its me-

mories and associations must be very bitter. No; it was very selfish of her, very wrong and selfish, to wish him to come back; she would hope he might not, and as she was trying very conscientiously to foster such a quixotic sentiment, the thought of Hester Lockstone—Mrs. Geldfinder now—very naturally recurred with it, and she began to think over her conduct to Frank—her strange, bad conduct to him! How could she so treat such a man! After so many years, too! Poor, poor Frank! Surely he could not imagine that all women were like that one?

And Mabel paused a long time over that question, full ten minutes, finally satisfying herself with the assurance that it was very unlikely, indeed, that he would. As for Mrs. Geldfinder herself—she deserved to lose the happiness she had so thrown away, and for the first time in her life, a little vengeful spirit was lighted in Mabel's fresh young heart, and she hoped very earnestly that a time might come to Mrs. Geldfinder when she would discover her folly, and repent too late.

It was a very safe indulgence of resentment for another, that little wish, as, like most of its brethren of all sorts and kinds, it was not destined to be gratified. It could not be so in the wisher's sense of it, simply because Hester Lockstone's nature would not permit her to feel as Mabel did. She was perfectly incapable of it!

If the young lawyer's departure had made a great blank in Mabel's life, a greater blank, indeed, than she knew or understood herself, it was felt very sensibly by others, and by Mr. Lee so loudly and continuously mourned over, that it threatened to become as serious a grievance as the privations of his present mode of life—to outweigh and supersede these, indeed, since he was beginning to grow more and more accustomed to them; while of the absence of Frank he complained daily, hourly.

"You told me he would come back soon, Mabel," he would say peevishly; "why doesn't he come? Why don't you send for him? He came back before."

"And will again, Edward," Mrs. Lee ven-

tured to answer; "I feel sure he will not forget to come and see us when he can."

But the old man was not satisfied; Mabel was his usual soother and comforter, and he could not be quieted by another if she was by; not always if she was not.

"Mabel, darling," he repeated, plaintively, "why doesn't he come?"

"He is busy, papa dear. Mr. Marsden has other things to do besides thinking of us," and as she caught her mother's eye wistfully watching her during this speech, which had ended with an unconscious sigh, the young girl coloured.

Mrs. Lee sighed too, and turned away her face. Why had she let the young man associate so constantly, so freely with Mabel? How wrong, how blind, how foolish she had been! Had she forgotten he was a young, handsome man, as well as the lawyer employed by her son and brother?—that secluded and dull as Mabel's life was, it had been a dangerous intimacy for her? But then, how, situated as they were, could she help it? Why, Doctor Armsdaile himself had en-

couraged, almost enforced his being received as one of the family! Was her darling child's happiness to be the sacrifice of it all?—to follow all the rest of their treasures, and be lost with the loss of the Manor? Oh! this would be the sorest trial of all!

And then came the doubt that Frank might not return the affection he had inspired! Perhaps there was a brighter lot in store for her, after all! And then flashed up the indignant rejection of such a match. What! an attorney, a man hardly better in position than Stephen Lockstone himself, a match for Miss Lee!—for her Mabel! No, never! What was she thinking of? And the poor lady looked proudly up, and as she did so her eyes rested on that close, square little chamber, with its scant furniture, its inconveniences, its heat and glare—above all, on the worn, weary face of Mabel herself, who was just now finding it very hard to bear the continuous fire of questions about young Marsden which her father was resolutely keeping up.

A bitter smile of mockery at herself and her forgetfulness rose to the usually gentle face of

Mrs. Lee. What foolish, idle thoughts had she been thinking? How vain, how proud, how useless! Why, would not such a union be the best thing for Mabel? Would it not relieve her from the trying life now telling on her youth so sadly, and give her the enjoyments and pleasures of society she had never yet known? Ah! how very silly it was to speculate in that way!—worse than silly, it was wrong! Things were ordered for us far better than we could regulate them ourselves, and when events presented themselves, then was the time, and not till then, to come to a decision respecting them. And so poor Mrs. Lee ended by preaching a little sermon to herself, and trying hard to shut out all these busy thoughts that troubled heart and brain so sorely.

Truth to say, it was a dull, cheerless, hopeless, trying time at No. 5, Newman's Buildings, that beautiful summer and early autumn. The heavy clouds of trial swept over it, one after another, with a ceaseless, monotonous gloom that might well have told on the spirits of an older girl than Mabel, situated as she was.

There was the one terrible certainty that nothing could be done to dispossess Stephen Lockstone from their old home. That dwelling-place of themselves and their ancestors through many and many a generation, had passed away from them for ever; while the blank left in their little household by Frank Marsden's departure was in some way, perhaps, felt as even a greater loss for the time being; since the absence of that which brings comfort and pleasure to daily life, even if trifling in itself, is sure to be almost as sorely missed as a greater but less constantly present and visibly realized possession.

Then there were the sad letters from America. The sincere distress of the worthy uncle, the stormy grief of the son and brother, who was evidently heartbroken by the news of the bitter disappointment to his hopes—depended on as they had been with boyish certainty and eagerness. Both letters revived and doubled the old grief in the tender, loving women's hearts at home. The expense of the law proceedings, too, had fallen very heavily on Mr. Charlton, at the same time when

certain political influences on the Continent told heavily on the American trade, causing the merchants to suffer in consequence; Mr. Charlton so severely, that he was constrained to lessen very considerably the liberal allowance he was in the habit of sending his sister.

"For your boy's sake," he wrote, "I must do it, my dearest sister, though I fear you will find it very inconvenient, to say the least; but if I am to keep my head above water at all in these times, I must economise every penny of ready money to the utmost; and if I went, where would Ned's future prospects be now, or your own, for that matter? We must submit to a little passing (I hope) difficulty, to provide better against its recurrence in the future."

Mrs. Lee was a little troubled at the reference to the lawyer's bills in his letters. For the moment it superseded other thoughts, and she said to Dr. Armsdaile hesitatingly,

"Mr. Marsden seemed so kind—as if he felt so much for us—I am a little surprised at my brother's speaking of his charges as so enormous!"

"His charges, my dear madam—they would have been small enough, depend on it. But the first firm in London don't do business for nothing; and Messrs. Sharpe, Kewter, and Watchemklose don't go into the matter of private feelings where their employment is concerned. It would hardly pay, you know; and Frank was only their agent, don't you see?"

"Oh!" said Mrs. Lee, greatly relieved, but not at all seeing it in the way the impatient Doctor intended that she should.

"Just like them—just like women, the very best of them," he muttered to himself, as he hastened down the path to his carriage; "they get hold of an idea, half a one, and the wrong half generally—don't the least understand the circumstances surrounding, modifying the facts of cases, jump to a conclusion, and—and get into a mess—would, at any rate, if left to themselves," and the good old man fumed away as the brougham carried him off to his patients; for he was not in a happy frame of mind—the news from America having terribly disquieted him, more so than he

allowed Mrs. Lee to perceive. He was not comfortable in regard to Mabel—something more than appeared was wrong with her—she was not like herself; and then those Lees were so proud—he had tried to benefit them before, and as delicately as he knew how, poor man! but the old Lee blood took fire in a moment with Mabel, and even Mrs. Lee was hurt by his repeated offers of service. What was to be done with such sensitive people, who gratefully accepted any other service than hard cash—"half looked for it, apparently, by what she said of Frank Marsden just now, as if the poor boy could afford to wear his life out for his friends for nothing," irascibly said the Doctor, "and had every sense but common sense."

And then he began to torture his brains to discover some way of helping them in secret. Couldn't he bribe Deborah to pay the bills, and say nothing?—no, Mrs. Lee looked too closely after her housekeeping for that. Could he send them a hundred pound note anonymously? They wouldn't touch it; and the poor perplexed gentleman began lugubriously

to think the best thing for all parties might be his own death, when the little property he had saved would go to Mabel, he having so willed it immediately on the loss of the Lee Manor estate by his old patient, Dr. Armsdaile having no near relatives with prior claims upon him.

But he was a hale old man still, with more years of life in him, probably, than many a younger one. So that project seemed as hopeless as the other, and the good Doctor went grumbling on—"Frank Marsden overcharging, indeed! About the most improbable event you could have hit on, Mrs. Lee. Why, he'd be much more likely to give you three parts of his fortune, if he could; only, like me, he doesn't know how to do it," and he leaped out as his carriage stopped, and flew into a luxuriously-furnished drawing-room, where he rather startled a very nervous patient by an irritable and Abernethy-like lecture on fancies. He did her good, though.

The sad little household in Newman's Buildings deeply felt the larger privation of a reduction of a good third of the little income left

them, and a smaller one came to them at the same time, in the less frequent presents from Meadowlands. It was a terrible trial to Reuben Hernshaw to go into Merestown four, perhaps five times running, and not leave a well-filled basket at No. 5; but times were bad, and things had gone very wrong with him of late.

Stephen Lockstone would not let him off his lease, and as scrupulously kept to the terms of it himself, as he enforced them on Hernshaw; but he found many ways of showing to the farmer he was neither unobservant nor indifferent to his actions as regarded the reception of the Sawyers, and other matters evidencing the good man's real feelings respecting himself. He gave him no privileges he could possibly avoid, took away many he had previously enjoyed, seized every possible advantage he could in regard to him, gave Tuffnell strict orders to have no bartering of any sort with him; and as the Meadowlands produce had hitherto supplied all the home farm deficiencies, and all the unprovided-for needs of the Manor House, Hernshaw

had always hitherto looked to them as his chief market, and for a time at last felt considerable inconvenience from a glut of articles for which he could find no demand; while all the petty matters of poultry, butter, eggs, &c., which had hitherto been, if not a matter of indifference, at any rate one of very minor consequence, were now so much an object for the ready money they brought, that he was obliged for the present to be less generous of these gifts.

So, as is often the case, just when the farm gifts would have been of treble value to the receivers, they came so rarely, they could not be reckoned on; and Mabel, as week after week passed, and no Meadowlands cart rattled up to the door, would feel another barb enter her sore heart, and begin to think everyone had indeed deserted them. For of course Reuben Hernshaw kept away sedulously. "If he could take nothing, he'd not go; he'd be ashamed to go making excuses like that," as he once said to his good wife when she suggested something of the sort. "No, please God, he'd get customers soon,

he wasn't afraid of that, though they might be slow in coming, and then he'd go, glad and proud enough, and tell Miss Mabel all about it, every bit, and take twice as much as he did before, to make up—that he would!"

So he stopped away, and left Miss Mabel with her heavy heart, thinking, not unkindly —that she found it difficult to do of any one, impossible of Reuben Hernshaw—but very, very sadly, and wishing Reuben had said he was not coming again. He should not have come at all! No doubt it did not please Stephen Lockstone, and he was his landlord now. Poor Reuben could not help that, and was right to think of not angering him, on account of his family. Ah! well, it was different now, no doubt. All hope for them was over, and the Manor was in the possession of the Lockstones beyond all doubt; but she would rather he had not come at all! And then poor Mabel would fairly burst into tears, if she were alone when she reached this point of her reflections.

She struggled bravely, but her young heart was sorely bruised and bleeding, and the daily

trials of her life grew heavier and heavier as she felt forsaken by all! Had Reuben Hernshaw only known—but he did not know, how should he?—that the failure in American remittances was making it difficult, almost impossible, to provide the old man with dainties; that Mrs. Lee and Mabel lived as sparingly as might be, that these might be procured occasionally, at least; that there was careful reckoning up of the little store in the purse, anxious consultations with Deborah on what could and could not be done, with contrivances and economies of all sorts, such as woman's tender love seems specially gifted to originate and plan, the need in his own home would have been fourfold before he would have thought of suspending those little gifts of his. Nay, had he known only how Mabel felt the omission! And had Mabel herself just been told the truth as regarded the poor farmer, much pain would have been spared her, and she would have been the first to approve what he had done, so sorely against his will. Mrs. Hernshaw was quite right—it would have been better to explain matters

at first, but honest Reuben kept it till the last. Ignorance is said to be the mother of many things. Surely it is the source of a very great amount of pain, in regard to the actions and motives of friends, unless wisdom steps in and defers all judgment till the time for explanation arrives!

What little the Lees had to live on of their own was a very slender income of Mrs. Lee's, hers before her marriage, and at it settled on her conscientiously by her husband. He would fain have multiplied it many times over, and made it a more suitable provision for his wife, the future lady of the Manor, but his circumstances at the time utterly precluded this, unless in intention, and on very vague contingencies, upon which, as subsequent events showed, they were wise to place no reliance. Added to this was another and still smaller sum, which some of the principal creditors of the estate had clubbed together to subscribe, when they saw how matters were going with the old family, and which they had presented to Mrs. Lee—as a mark of their respect for her husband, they said. More truly it was a

mark of their respect for his ancestors, their pity for herself and her children. The poor imbecile old man was exactly that description of character, and had always been since his long residence abroad, which people of that sort have not the least fellow-feeling for, or sympathy with. Never placed in like circumstances, never exposed to the smallest of his temptations, they cannot understand the peril of the one, or excuse the least yielding to the other.

From these two sources came all the yearly income remaining to the family in No. 5, Newman's Buildings; and but for the good uncle's generous aid, their daily life must have been more straitened than it was—a greater contrast to the luxurious abundance of the Manor. If that assistance should now utterly fail, the difficulties besetting them would be much more sorely felt.

"Miss Mabel," Deborah said one morning, startling the young girl from a deep and by no means happy reverie, judging from the expression on her face, where traces of tears even yet lingered—"Miss Mabel," and she looked

at her darling nurse-child more scrutinisingly as she spoke than Mabel at all approved, "I'm at my wit's end for the dinner to-day, my darling, and want you to help me," and she came behind her chair, and stroked the glossy hair, as she had often done years ago at the Manor.

The action recalled those times to Mabel with an almost painful vividness—the contrast between then and now! Was she ever again to be light-hearted or happy, to feel as if life was anything but a weary, weary burden? A crowd of thoughts and feelings rushed over her, and the poor young thing, with one vain gasp for self-possession, gave the matter up, and laying her head in its old resting-place on Deborah's shoulder, cried as though her heart was breaking.

The faithful servant was not sorry to see that plentiful shower—she knew it would relieve the oppressed spirit; for though Deborah was not altogether cognisant of every complication of feeling in the young heart, she did know many causes for its grief; she had seen how bravely the burden had been

borne, and every inclination to murmur or repine struggled with. She had noticed how the task had grown harder of late, and felt sure the tension of "keeping up," as Mabel had done, had been overmuch for one so young and so delicately nurtured.

The feelings must find a vent at last, or wear out the delicate case which had striven to hide them so carefully and tenderly from every loving eye. So Deborah soothed and petted, but never tried to check that passion of grief, till it subsided of itself; and Mabel looked up into the sympathising face bent over her, and smiling more genuinely than she had done for weeks, said penitently,

"Oh! dear Deb, what a baby I am! You should give me a scolding, as you used to do. I am sure I want it, and I think it would do me good."

"We'll see about that presently, darling," Deborah answered, in no reproving tone; "but now just tell me something or other I can manage for the master's dinner, there's a dear; as for my mistress, she will have a little soup, and make a show with the bread,

and just nothing at all after. And you, Miss Mabel, dear, why, your appetite is clean gone away, it seems to me," and she shook her head sadly.

"Oh! I do very well, you dear old Deb," returned Mabel, blushing a little; "I am quite sure I have a great deal more than I deserve," she added, sighing; "if I can behave no better than I did just now."

Deborah did not answer; she only stood looking at the fair face before her, so different in expression now to what it had been only two short years before; and yet it was sweeter than ever, perhaps. Mabel caught her eye presently, and trying to seem gayer, asked,

"But what came of the half chicken, Deb? —why, we were quite grand yesterday."

"Yes; but the master wouldn't like to see it again, you know, dear; and what to do now, I don't know—I thought you might help me a bit, you see, darling, knowing all those foreign filigrees he liked so much."

Deborah had also thought that a little practical active usefulness in a fresh direction

might not be very amiss for her sorrowful young lady either; but that she did not explain.

Mabel set herself to reflect upon the knotty culinary point, and presently said, more brightly than she had spoken for some time, except to her father—towards him there had been no change; however sad and heavy her heart, her lip had always worn the ready smile for him; and he, poor old man, was satisfied—the power to judge of its reality was gone.

"Yes, I think I know what will just do—some dish François used to make of poulet, and—I forget, but I know mamma has the receipt in her book—I will look it out and bring it you, my good Nanah," and as she uttered the familiar childish name, she gave her fond nurse one of the old childish caresses.

Deborah retreated, not at all dissatisfied with her morning's work.

"She'll do better, now she's had a little of it out, the darling; but I'd like to see the gladsome light back in her blue eyes again. Ah! me, it's a weary world this to live in, where the young have a world's care upon

them, as one may say, before they're well out of their childhood. My two handsome children—one away, no one knows how far, seeking his fortune, and the other moping her life out here, tending her poor old father in such a hole as this! That ever things should have come to this pass! Who would ever have thought it when I first went to the Manor?—the old home and the old family, and the real gentlefolks about them, and everything belonging to them. Ah! Steve Lockstone, may you have your deserts some day! The poor childish old man!—to cheat him, as you must, I'm pretty sure! Ah! me, it's a thousand pities it was let go on so. He was never much of a man, to my thinking, wasn't the master, even when I first went there," and Deborah proceeded with her work and her soliloquy together.

Meantime, Mabel hunted for and found the desired receipt, and hastened in triumph to Deborah. The latter detained her awhile, on pretence of helping her to make some preparations for it; and when at last Mabel sprang away on hearing her father's step on the stair,

she looked after her complacently, with the thought, "There, she goes quicker and lighter now than she's done for months; any fashing of her is better than to let her sit moping all the morning over sad thoughts, as she's been doing."

And to Mabel herself came something of the same idea, with the added self-questioning of how she had been fulfilling all her duty lately; and she began to think there might be a better way of distracting her own melancholy, and lightening their present load of misfortune, than by helplessly sitting brooding over and lamenting it.

CHAPTER XII.

STEPHEN LOCKSTONE sat in the well-worn armchair in the familiar office belonging to the old house in the High-street. He had sat in that chair for years. He seemed in no haste to forsake it now. What he had done in it was a great deal of business, resulting in the fortune that was now his own. What he did in it now it would have been a puzzle to say, a puzzle to himself as to others. Yet thither he came day after day, till men had ceased to wonder at his coming even. Here day after day he sat—sat generally as he was sitting now, leaning a little forward, his hands resting on his knees, his face bent down, with the moody anxious expression habitual to it when alone.

He had gained the object for which he had toiled all his life; he was a rich, a very rich man. He was lord of one of the finest estates

in the county; he was gradually taking his place in it, among its best society, as one of the landed gentry. He had come off victorious, unscathed, notwithstanding that terrible inquiry with which he was aware he had been menaced. He had nothing more to fear now, surely. Why should he not sit down content and happy to enjoy his many goods.

Was he content? No. But for that matter, who ever was or ever will be really so in this world? Was he happy? He might be; but if he was his countenance belied it strangely. Stephen Lockstone's was a face on which happiness found it very difficult to set her mark, no doubt. Still there need not have been that careworn, furrowed brow, the defiant scowl of the eyebrows, the morose curve in the mouth. But all these were there, more plainly to-day than usual, too.

The lawyer had been thinking some of these thoughts within himself, not, perhaps, just as they appear here, but to the same effect, and they had not tended to improve his look, or make him more reconciled to his own actions.

"Why can I not enjoy it now I have it?" he muttered angrily to himself, clenching his fist and scowling round at the dusty shelves with more sullen ferocity than ever; "what is the reason I cannot shake this off? I am safe enough *now*. That drivelling dotard cannot harm me now." And he rose, impatient at his own craven thoughts, and took a hurried turn about the room.

Stephen Lockstone's walk in thus pacing a room was peculiar, unlike that of most men—very unlike his own determined daughter Sarah's. He did not take firm rapid strides, with erect head and bearing, but he shuffled along hurriedly, with an irresolute step, his head hung down, and he stopped every now and then, as though looking for, expecting some enemy. Thus he walked now, arresting his long uneven steps ever and again to peer round the room, and listen if any one were approaching. His was not a pleasant head and face to look upon when doing this. He reminded you of some fox or weasel, fearful of being discovered and spoiled of their unlawful prey.

By-and-bye he went and sat down again,

looking as he did so a shade less evil than he had before. He had been afraid his daughter would come in on him again. Now he hoped she might not. If there was one thing Stephen Lockstone dreaded, hated more than another in a small way, it was those sudden, unlooked-for intrusions of Sarah's. She delighted in them, and in the evident annoyance they were to him. Nothing she liked better than dashing suddenly in on him when least expected, and that at the most uncertain times and seasons, so that he could never feel safe from her. Sometimes he thought he had even better stay at the Manor itself than be subject to the sudden starts and frights she gave him. There, he should at least know what to expect.

But, no! it was better to be here and endure these annoyances, than be always in that house. He had looked forward anxiously to being its master; and now he was so, he scarcely dared remain in it. Sarah scoffed at and ridiculed him —but he must bear that. Would she be braver in his place? Perhaps so. He was not sure, and he pondered the question with a strange mixture of admiration, fear, and hatred for his

younger born. Then by-and-bye he began to think again over his own feelings. Ah! he could be happy and brave enough yet, but for one thing. After all, why should he fear that? He could deny all knowledge of it if, by any chance, it ever came to light, which it never would now, he felt tolerably sure. No, he—Ah! Tony Hicks! What evil demon had ever induced him to send Tony on that unnecessary errand, as it had turned out to be, and what worse demon had brought him safe back, now to be the thorn in his side, just when all else would have been so smooth? If foul wishes could but take effect, Tony Hicks would not much longer have been enjoying the comforting potations he was then imbibing at the Royal Oak, after those thoughts had arisen in the troubled brain of Stephen Lockstone.

The thought of Tony brought to the lawyer's mind the fact that it was within a day or so of the one on which this man—his living nightmare—was accustomed to call on him for the weekly sum doled out to him. A day more, or rather it would be more correct to

say only a day or two less, was of little import to Tony; it was just as likely he should come before the time as at it—rather more so; and with this new anticipation in his mind, filling it with a fresh dread, Stephen Lockstone once more started from his seat, but this time only to unlock a drawer. From this he took certain monies, and carefully wrapping them in paper, made them up into a square packet. This he tied, and then sealed at both ends with his own private seal. When quite certain it was perfectly secure, after he had examined it cautiously on all sides, he went to that door of his office which communicated with the dwelling-house. Here he listened for some minutes, then slowly crept forward into the passage, calling Rachel as he did so. He had got quite to the farther end before Rachel answered, and then had to wait till she ascended from some lower region, where, judging by her personal appearance, which was none of the cleanest or most tidy, she must have been waging fierce war on very black dirt and dust.

"Did you call?" she asked, as if rather

resenting the possibility of his having done so.

"Yes, Rachel," and Mr. Lockstone spoke in a gentle, conciliatory tone, very unusual with him when addressing inferiors.

But nothing softened, Rachel vouchsafed no other reply than an impatient "Well?" as he paused.

"Has—has Tony Hicks been, Rachel?"

"Not that I know; I've not answered one or two rings at the bell, I've been too busy turning out that inner cellar downstairs; but he'd either go round to the office and rap there, or"—and here Rached did relax into a grim smile, not, however, at Mr. Lockstone, but at her own thoughts—"he'd make himself heard somehow. He's not easily daunted, or put out of his way, isn't Tony!"

No. Mr. Lockstone was too well aware of that, as he grievously thought, while Rachel spoke.

"Well, Rachel, if he should come," he resumed, "would you be so good as to give him that, and say I—I'm too busy to speak to him to-day?"

"And if he shouldn't come?"

"Keep it till to-morrow, Rachel, and do exactly the same then. I think he'll come to-day or to-morrow, without a doubt."

"And suppose he won't go without seeing you?" asked Rachel, again, persistent in raising objections, or, at least, difficulties, in the way of her master's earnest desire to dispose easily of his *bête noir* for this time, at any rate.

"Well, Rachel, you must send him away somehow. I really can't see him just now. You'll manage it any way you please," and Stephen Lockstone started like a guilty thing as a summons at the outer door came at the moment he was speaking, and rapidly retreated back again to his den.

He would have liked very much to ask Rachel who she thought it was likely to be; but he did not dare risk either his voice being heard, or Rachel's opening the door while he still stood within view of it. Rachel, who was an old servant, knew her own ground particularly well, was an ally of Sarah's, and took liberties sometimes accordingly.

Once again back in his den, the lawyer threw himself down into the well-worn, shiny depths of his leather chair with a feeling of relief, as though he had accomplished a great thing. He was now free, he hoped, of the hateful presence of Tony Hicks for a week! He sank back into the moody reveries from which the thought of this man had roused him. Fulfilled hopes proverbially bring less of that unalloyed extatic pleasure their anticipation promised; the once unseen thorns are felt about the gathered rose; the spots on the sun are visible when it is brought too near us by a magnifying glass; the dweller in an abode that looks to the mere beholder perfection, knows of its "pea-hen on the wall," its snake in the velvet lawn!

So the coveted possession grasped proves not so flawless as it was believed when only coveted, and many a sharp thorn, and many a disfiguring speck, takes from its value on nearer acquaintanceship. All this happens commonly enough, but Stephen Lockstone's hopes had been in one sense more than fulfilled—his success was complete, he could find

no fault he had not known before in his magnificent new home; but, ah! how differently he felt from what he had hoped to feel when fairly dwelling in it as its master.

He had been less anxious, less uneasy, when working away, drudging day after day, in that same office, for the riches he longed for, than now, when he spent whole days there from choice, sitting idly ruminating, just to escape worse torture in that same beautiful home he had employed so many arts and so much wary watchfulness to win.

Whether Stephen Lockstone had ever been a happy man is very doubtful. Perhaps he had not found the secret of the way to happiness, although he fancied that he had, and pursued it most persistently, not to say unscrupulously; but that he was far less happy now than when the one object of his life was unattained, was true beyond a doubt.

He had not been thinking very long this time, when he rose once more, and muttering half aloud, "Surely, surely it must be among them somewhere, folded in, perhaps," he walked to one side of the office, mounted on

the stool, and stretching his hands far above his head, reached down with some difficulty one of those large fire-proof boxes which take the place of books on lawyers' office shelves.

He looked it all over with great care, and mounting again, carefully examined the space whence he had extracted it, as if papers of any value were likely to be there. As nothing, however, but black cobwebs clinging about his sleeves, and winding round his fingers, resulted from this search, he hunted out the key belonging to the box, and after peering narrowly round and about the room, as though afraid some eyes might be lurking behind the fellow boxes of the one he had before him, or some invisible hands near ready to clutch and carry off any secret treasure it might disclose, he finally turned the lock and opened the lid.

The papers lying so quietly within were the title-deeds and various other documents belonging to the Lee Manor estate, once his client's and master's, now his own. For one short instant that thought brought intense pleasure to the man, and he leaned over and

gloated upon the insensible scrolls before him, as though they were animate objects, capable of reciprocating as well as of giving pleasure.

But that sensation passed away quickly—and the next moment brought the old fear, in its full force, nay, quickened by the sight of those tangible evidences of what he now held, what he ought to feel secure of, but did not; and madly, hurriedly, the cobwebbed fingers still unwiped, he dived amid the papers, brought some out, and spread them on the floor round about.

He sat in the midst of them, on the floor, just in front of the box, like a child, at once ransacking and guarding his treasures, with some of the papers spread out before him on his knees, some packets on either side of him. He felt, for the time, possessed by such an unreasoning, frantic longing for haste in the search he was commencing, that he could not put order into his proceedings, and separate, as he ought to have done, the examined from the unexamined packets.

What a farce it all was, Stephen Lockstone, as none knew better than yourself, had

you chosen to listen to your reason. You had hunted there a hundred, ay, a thousand times before, and ever with the like result; and yet there you were again, folding, unfolding, smoothing, peering now on this side now on that, holding each sheet up between you and the light, as though expecting to find secret characters written thereon, to tell you what you so madly, vainly longed to know!

What would you have thought of any other man who, with your knowledge and experience, had done the like? No matter, it was no one else but yourself, your own eager, self-excusing, wilfully-blinded self; and on and on went the work, each scrap of paper so minutely looked into, that had it been a voucher for a million, it could not have been more carefully or thoroughly examined to test its genuineness.

So absorbed was he in his occupation, that his face had lost its moroseness, and every other habitual expression; all being merged in the intent concentration of every faculty on this search. He heeded, for the time-being, nothing besides, and was consequently hap-

pier, inasmuch as all uneasiness, doubt, dread, expectation of evil were, for the moment, ignored, if not forgotten.

He did not even hear the door open, though it was no gentle hand that turned the lock, but one accustomed to insure an entrance anywhere, at any season, if such was the pleasure of the hour. He had quite forgotten to lock it, in the sudden eagerness to resume the search that had seized on him. He pursued the employment still, unheeding the rustle of garments as they passed to where he sat; and thus he might have remained, unconscious of another's presence, but for that mysterious sensation, feeling, intuitive knowledge—what is it?—that creeps involuntarily over us, be our occupation ever so engrossing, warning us we are not alone.

It came, after a few moments, on Stephen Lockstone with a force that terrified him well-nigh out of his senses. He looked up, starting so violently as to scatter the treasured papers round about in hopeless confusion. His daughter was standing behind him, that terrible mocking smile on her lip which ever

made his flesh quiver and shake; scorn flashing from her eyes; her riding-whip in her hand pointed at the box before him, with a jeering meaning, as it seemed to him; her riding-skirt sweeping behind her on the floor, and her magnificent beauty in the fullest flush of its startling radiance.

How he loathed it at that instant, though some of the features that made it so perfect were his own, softened and totally changed, it is true, in their expression, but still his. He loathed the beauty and its possessor, and would have gladly shrunk away anywhere, with anyone—ay! even Tony Hicks, to have avoided the interview now imminent.

"So, this is the way you occupy the precious hours devoted to your overwhelming business in your office, sir. I fancied I had known you examine this box once before, to say the least."

And she stopped, as if expecting a reply, her eyes full of contempt, and, so it seemed to him, amusement also.

"It is very often necessary to look over the same matters a—a dozen times, perhaps,"

he stammered, striving hard to assume the indifference he did not feel, the semblance of the real business which was not there.

"Indeed! I feel quite oppressed by the magnitude of such a piece of knowledge. Still, I do not exactly see how it bears on the matter in question. Perhaps you will enlighten me a little further," and her voice had a scoffing raillery in it hard to bear.

Stephen Lockstone did not answer; he began once more to re-sort the unfortunate papers in silence, and with a dogged air of endurance.

Sarah laughed low and scornfully.

"It is not pleasant to try and gull folks and fail, is it, sir? Shall I give you a bit of advice, which has, at any rate, one advantage over most, let me tell you, and that is, the giver practises it herself—never try the false bait with those who will not take it."

"I—I," stammered Mr. Lockstone again, and finally lapsed into a rather helpless "I can't think what object you have in coming and interrupting me so, Sarah."

"Not quite the same, perhaps, that you

have in coming and pretending to be so occupied; and yet," she added, musingly, and with so different an expression on her face to any he had ever seen there before, that her father, catching a glimpse of it, gazed in utter wonderment at the change it wrought in her, "and yet there may be more resemblance in the root of the matter—but what was I dreaming of? At any rate, it helps both of us to get through the day—you will allow so much, I hope?" and she looked more scornfully mocking than ever, as if to make up for that passing gleam of other, deeper sentiments.

Stephen Lockstone sighed. He fancied he knew well enough how to employ his days, or should know well enough, at any rate, one difficulty in his path once removed. He recommenced upon the papers again.

His daughter watched him a little while in silence, then kicking them contemptuously with her foot, said,

"It is fortunate your parchments are tough and strong, or they might hardly stand the amount of manipulation you so affection-

ately bestow on some of them. Why not split a few open now, and see if it has not got in between?" she added, suddenly and sharply.

The troubled lawyer half bounded from his seat, low as it was, as though some serpent had stung him, and exclaimed,

"What do you mean, Sarah? Why the devil do you goad me thus?"

She laughed.

"That's right, sir, a straightforward question is worth all the hypocrisy in the world to me; only don't garnish it with more oaths than you can avoid. They might flavour it too strongly for my taste, you see. You ask why I, as you are pleased to call it, 'goad' you? It's not a complimentary term to apply to my filial tenderness," she continued, with scoffing bitterness; "but let that pass. In the first place, then, I am curious to observe to what pitch of folly your timorous fear will at last carry you; next, I am properly anxious to guard you, as much as lies in my power, from being too frightened at your own shadow; lastly, I am willing to see the play played out through all its scenes,

though I confess these are becoming something monotonous;" and as she spoke, Sarah quietly seated herself on the arm of the great chair, gathering her draperies round her, in a fashion which would have charmed Harry Neville, could he have seen it, so queenlike was the natural dignity of every fold and curve, to say nothing of the attitude of the wearer, unstudied as was her position.

Stephen Lockstone was roused, roused out of his ordinary self this time, as his hastily uttered answer witnessed, when he said bitterly,

"You are only interested as a spectator, then, Miss Lockstone?"

"Not bad!" cried Sarah, approvingly. "I am not sure but you will improve in time, sir. If you do, I shall have not the slightest objection to pitting our wits against each other; meantime, allow me to ask if you intend to continue this daily incarceration of yourself in the old office?"

Her father looked up, genuinely surprised at this, and answered as his first thought suggested,

"Why, you yourself proposed it!"

"I know I did, while you were walking about like a thief in your own house, and would have been grateful to anybody who would have hidden you. Probably you would not have thanked them for their pains when they had done; but that's no matter, you looked as if you momentarily expected the walls of the Manor to give way, and close you in a fast embrace. I suggested getting out of it as the remedy; but I did not mean you to keep so till folks were talking of your greed of gain, robbing others of a chance of a livelihood, and of your pursuing your work as a lawyer, when you have that of a landed gentleman to attend to. The remedy has failed; it must now be set aside to make way for another."

Stephen Lockstone listened like one in a dream. He understood his tormentor perfectly well—nay, he felt there was that usual justice, that terrible clear-sighted judgment in all she said, which ever filled him with combined admiration and hatred of this cool, calculating daughter. Years ago he should have felt, seen just the same. Why could he not now?—or, at any rate, why could he not act

as if he did, without needing any spur from her? Sarah watched the varying expressions of his face, and divined what was passing in his mind. The old smile curled her lip as she observed,

"Is it wise to despise, or rather to reject good counsel, out of spite, because we did not suggest it ourselves? I should unhesitatingly say no!"

"What is it you want?" blurted out her father, in a sort of despair.

"I? Personally nothing at present," and then, after enjoying the impotent rage this answer had aroused, she proceeded calmly, "If you wish to know what I think you want, it is resolution to shake off these phantom fears besetting you, to take and hold your position as a man. You have no longer the shadow of an excuse in the world's eye for acting as you do. It injures your interests already. It would injure you more if——"

She hesitated.

"If what?" gasped Stephen Lockstone, and something in his daughter's face turned his white with fear.

Sarah eyed him curiously, never speaking a word, never taking her eyes off him, for fully three minutes, during which he stood trembling before her—for he had risen—trembling with fear, and with impatience.

"You would make a bad witness," she said, presently, "however good a lawyer you may be."

"What do you mean, Sarah? What did you mean?" cried her tortured father, impatiently.

She stooped towards him and whispered half a dozen words in his ear. He staggered back, and would have fallen, but that the table came opportunely in the way.

"How?—What?—Who?" he gasped, as he recovered a little from the startling shock given him. "Who said?—Who told?—What do you mean, Sarah?"

She looked at him now, ineffable scorn shining out of her wonderful eyes, as she said, sternly,

"You know what I mean, sir, better, probably, than I. Do not waste words to no purpose. With me you know it is useless—

or you might know by this time. Leave the thing at rest. Be satisfied that you will do no good with your researches here, or your panics there, in your *home*," she laid a stress on the word. "Leave the one, remain in the other, and learn to do what belongs to your position in it. You have pandered to your fears enough—your conscience one might call it—but if that had aught to say in the matter there might be a different way of quieting it," and, as she spoke, Sarah fixed her eyes on his again with a strange, penetrating gaze.

He quailed before it, and his eyes sought the floor, craven written in every line of his quivering face. They were a strange contrast, that father and daughter, as they faced each other at that instant. She poised lightly but easily on the arm of the old chair, the outline of her well-proportioned figure showing to the greatest advantage, both as to dress and attitude; her face, exquisite in its beauty, so far as feature and colouring were concerned, lighted by such an expression of scorn as suited its character well, and truly enhanced its attractions.

He standing uneasily in front of her, his shoulders stooping, his head bent down, his hands toying uneasily with one of the bits of red tape he had taken from the papers while examining them, his whole attitude and look bespeaking a mixture of shame, helpless, would-be defiance, and real cowardice, which was not pleasant to look upon.

And so Sarah thought, for presently she turned impatiently away, with a gesture that seemed to intimate something nearly akin to disgust. As she turned, she caught sight of a hat belonging to some one outside, who was evidently endeavouring to peer through the wire blinds of the window. She took one rapid step towards it, and looked out, then said, turning once again towards her father,

"There is your friend and ally, Tony Hicks. He is evidently desirous of ascertaining whether you are here or not. That is another great advantage of your continual visits to this office, it facilitates your constant reception of old friends. Whether the town is likely to make observations upon such intimacies, I will leave you to judge."

"I told Rachel I would not see him."

"To-day, perhaps not. What is to prevent his forcing his way in to-morrow, or any other day, for that matter? Even now you see what results from your orders; he is standing there, a spectacle for every Merestown gossip," and as she spoke, Sarah advanced nearer the window, caught Tony's eye in a moment, and to her father's utter astonishment, he walked away, and almost immediately disappeared.

"What made him do that?" he asked, so relieved by the feeling of his safety from Tony, he forgot for a moment the worse thraldom of his daughter.

"That!" said the latter, contemptuously; "I, to be sure. I signed to him to take himself off. Do you think he was likely to disobey me? And now, sir, suppose you put those papers safely away again. With the best speed of your pretty bays, you will barely be at the Manor by dinner-time. I am going at once," and so saying, she left the room, and her father to follow her counsel if he would. And he did so not only in the minor matter

of the papers, but also in what were to him the far weightier ones of staying more at the Manor, and coming less frequently to the old house in the High Street.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

LONDON: PRINTED BY MACDONALD AND TUGWELL, BLENHEIM HOUSE.

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